Toaru Majutsu no Index -Road to Endymion-

Academy City prepares for the Daihasei-sai. The Level 0 boy Kamijou Touma and Index, the nun with 103,000 grimoires perfectly memorized, enjoy themselves after school as always.

But when Kamijou coincidentally touches a certain structure, the Necessarius magician Stiyl Magnus attacks.

Stiyl has come to deal with magicians who have infiltrated Academy City.

Those magicians who abhor science are from the Hindu magic cabal Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens.

As they setup a spell called Agni's Festival Fire throughout Academy City to cause large-scale destruction, Kamijou and Stiyl locate their hideout. But there they find a brown girl wearing a very revealing sailor uniform?

When science and magic cross paths, the story begins!

げ-き-じょ

とある魔術の禁書目録 インデックス
-ロード トウ エンデュミオン-

鎌池和馬

電撃劇場文庫

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Kamachi Kazuma

And now it's a space elevator! I decided something that large would surely create more than one sort of drama.

[Dengeki Bunko & Dengeki Gekijo Bunko Novels]

Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~22
Toaru Majutsu no Index SS 1 & 2
New Testament Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~6
Heavy Object Series (6 Books Total)
The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village 1 & 2
A Simple Survey
The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage
Toaru Majutsu no Index -Road to Endymion-

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

カバー／暁印刷

とある魔術の禁書目録インデックス

—ロード トゥ エンデュミオン—

鎌池和馬

イラスト／はいむらきよたか

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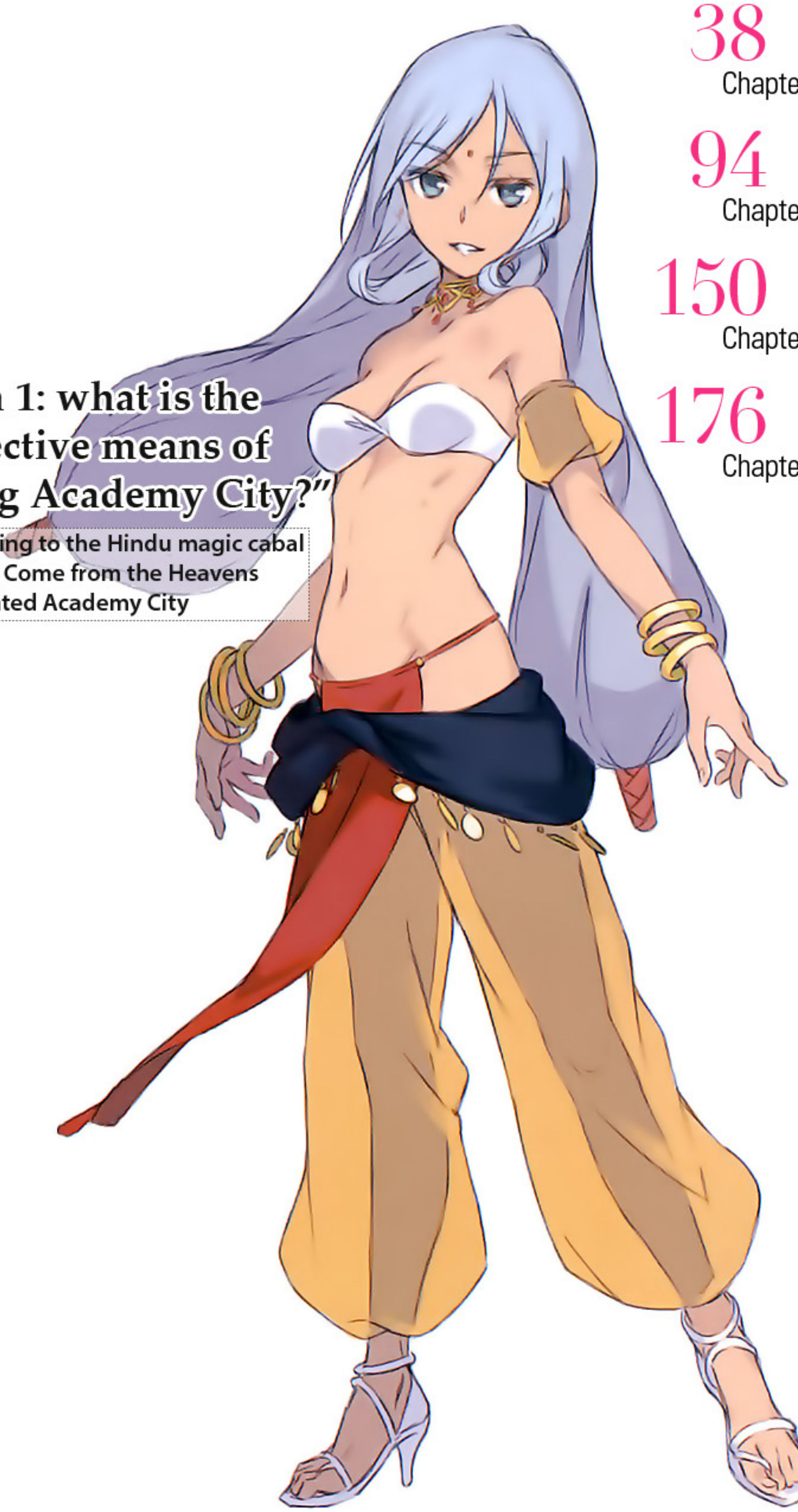


“Question 1: what is the most effective means of damaging Academy City?”

Magician belonging to the Hindu magic cabal
Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens
which has infiltrated Academy City

Ureapaddy

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)

CHAPTER 1

Part 1

A city existed on the west side of Tokyo that took up one third of the metropolis's area.

It was known as Academy City.

That city of science was a collection of cutting edge technological knowledge. It was the central point of a powerful influence on the entire world using the interests, predominance, and certain sort of trust and faith that reside in the keyword of "science".

Eighty percent of the residents were students.

For that reason, the city was made to push an image of safety and trustworthiness to the forefront, but information was strictly controlled below the surface. Many systems were laid out throughout the city in the name of preventing the approach of any terrorists or spies, be they industrial or working for a nation's government.

One area of the city had an especially strong focus on that side of things.

In that area, a Western man arrived at a "multi-story inn" meant for sightseers from outside the city.

"I try not to be surprised by much, but this is just insane."

On the outside, it looked like a standard rectangular building.

But the interior was mysteriously constructed so that each floor contained an entire one-story high class Japanese inn, garden and all. It was similar to several dioramas of Japanese buildings stacked on top of each other.

The design may have been created due to a lack of land or it may have been that common sense in Academy City was as different from the rest of the world as its technology was.

Either way, the man from outside the city simply could not get used to seeing it.

After making sure the middle-aged waitress who had shown him to his room had left, the man pulled out a small computer. Without worrying about security or the risk of

being traced, he connected to the network by plugging a cable into the port supplied in the room.

As he downloaded a few files stored online, the voice chat sign lit up.

He clicked to connect and a calm female voice came through.

“Did they get through?”

“I’m doing it now.” The man frowned slightly. “When you told me the download password, you should have specified whether the letters were uppercase or lowercase. If I hadn’t noticed and entered it wrong too many times, I would have been locked out.”

“Surely you know this is not my area of expertise.”

“There is such a thing as being too ignorant.”

He knew saying that would solve nothing, but he said it anyway.

And as he expected, the woman showed no sign of caring.

“I followed your instructions,” she said. “I doubt Academy City will detect it like this. The internet is convenient, but *they* completely control that field.”

“Academy City naturally monitors all data in the name of catching industrial spies. If you fill normal text with dangerous code words, their equipment can analyze it immediately.” The man opened the files that had finished downloading. “But that is only for *their* field. They know very little about the magic side. This city has been thoroughly optimized. If you try to hide it, they will certainly find it. Trying to sneak around like that will only get you caught faster. That is why you should not even try to hide it.”

The files contained a few different diagrams.

They were a type of magic circle.

With Academy City’s printing equipment, they could be quickly mass produced without destroying the magical symbols.

“Those circles were not mentioned in the meeting with *them*.”

“I doubt their lukewarm methods will be enough.”

The Western man accessed a map site and looked up a few photo studios. The arrival of digital cameras had put all of them in a crisis situation, but the man wanted their developing and printing equipment to accurately produce the magic circles he was going to use.

Naturally, the circles were a secret matter, so he would have to temporarily turn the printing technician into a puppet.

“If I try to do something within Academy City, I will eventually be caught. That means I need to construct a plan where it is too late for them by the time it has been revealed. If I act while taking some losses into consideration from the beginning, I can achieve a certain level of freedom even within this optimized city.”

“Just to be sure you know: it is possible you will not be able to return alive even if our goal is achieved.”

“I have worked that into my plan as well.”

“…”

“And it has been given tacit consent. Not by Academy City, but by our higher ups. We do not want the balance between magic and science to collapse. Everyone is aware that problem is much more important than the official reasons given. For that reason, I expect this situation will not be as bad as they say. Still, I doubt it will be so easy that I escape unharmed.”

After retrieving all the information he needed for the magic circles, the Western man disconnected his computer from the network.

He then headed for a photo studio.

The worker at the studio was an ordinary person, but he or she would end up being involved in magic even if only slightly. No matter how careful the man was, some risk remained that this person would become further involved in that hidden portion of the world.

But the man continued on regardless.

This showed just how urgent the situation was.

“…I’ll make you pay later for forcing me to carry out this kind of dirty work.”

Part 2

Academy City was known as a city of cutting edge science and an esper powers development institution, but nothing particularly strange or distinctive could be found in the scene of the students walking to school in the morning.

Normally at least. But on that morning…

“Communication error. You cannot currently enter the Venus Probe Project Race. Please try again later.”

“…”

A boy named Kamijou Touma stood still in the middle of the pathway.

He held a cell phone in his right hand and a project page on a popular SNS could be seen on the small screen.

“…What are you doing?”

A girl called out to him from behind.

She was Misaka Mikoto. She was the ace of the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School and Academy City’s #3 Level 5. She wore a white short-sleeve blouse, a beige summer sweater, and a gray pleated skirt. She had let out that confused question when she had realized the person blocking the flow of students heading to school was someone she knew.

The person in question, Kamijou Touma, was trembling.

“The entry page for this SNS project race has frozen because too many people are accessing it. But the next deadline is in 10 minutes! I don’t have time to wait!!”

“That’s the project linked with the Venus Probe Contest, right? With that ridiculous number of unmanned probes being launched into space, you have to predict which team will make the first discovery, right?”

“If you choose the probe to make the discovery, you get entered into a lottery for the right to name the discovery!!”

“Yeah, but even getting put into the lottery is still nowhere near 100% odds of getting to name it. That SNS has almost 1.5 million people on it in Academy City alone.”

“But I want to give an asteroid the name Kamijou Touma!!”

“Isn’t this contest about probes being sent to Venus?”

“I want to become a constellation in the night sky!!”

“That just makes it sound like you want to die.” But then a puzzled look appeared on Mikoto’s face. “Actually, I’m surprised you’re playing with something like this. I thought you weren’t too interested in this kind of thing.”

“My cell phone’s OS updated automatically recently and the SNS appeared then. The two companies must have some kind of agreement.”

“I-I see. By the way, how many friends do you have on there? I-if you just tell me your registration number, I could send you a request…”

“?”

Kamijou frowned because he could not quite make out what Mikoto was mumbling.

And then something turned his thoughts in a completely different direction.

“Touma!! You forgot to prepare a lunch for me again!!”

The loud voice of a pure white nun cut in.

Her name was Index.

She was gathering a lot of attention from the students heading to school, but she paid them no heed and continued toward Kamijou and Mikoto.

“Honestly, you always do this, Touma! Meals are the foundation of proper living!! What am I supposed to do if you neglect to make me one!?”

“…Can’t you just make your own meals?”

“People who know how to cook just don’t understand!!”

“I don’t think you should just give up because you don’t know how! And at any rate, I left you a lunch in the fridge!! Since you can’t use the microwave, I made you a giant vegetable and pork salad that doesn’t need to be heated up!!”

“I ate that snack ages ago!!”

“Can you please explain to me why you look so proud about that!?”

Mikoto had been completely expressionless for a while now.

And then she asked a question with her head tilted in puzzlement.

“Um, sorry to interrupt, but why are you acting like it is normal for you to make that girl’s meals and to look after her?”

“Fgh!? O-oh, um…!!”

“And I *really* want to know why you are yet again making me so angry for no reason!!”

“I’d like to ask why you suddenly started biri biri-ing!!”

Part 3

“Everything is good in tempura! What is the mysterious reason behind the bitterness disappearing!?”

“They’ll even eat okra and bell peppers! I couldn’t believe my child who used to take chopped bell pepper out of fried rice was eating a bell pepper that had only been sliced in half! (39 year old housewife)”

“These are the impressions of the individual and the same results cannot be guaranteed for everyone.”

With the trouble on the way to school over, Kamijou had parted ways with Index and Mikoto and peacefully sat through his lessons. It was now after school and he was sitting on a park bench while reading the advertisement emails sent to his phone via the SNS that was quite popular lately.

That normal high school boy named Kamijou Touma gave a quiet sigh.

“That’s a bible we don’t need at my place.”

After all, his roommate was hardly a picky eater. She would start chomping into the hard noodles of instant ramen well before the three minutes were up, and she seemed perfectly delighted with it. The Kamijou household valued quantity over quality. What he wanted was information on sales that allowed him to acquire large amounts of food cheaply.

But the girl sitting next to him did not look pleased.

Index was peering at the cell phone screen from the side.

“Mh, you can’t do this, Touma! Food is one of the foundations of human life. You need to always strive to improve yourself!!”

“Then why don’t you try to improve yourself by learning how to cook!?”

“By the way, what are we having for dinner tonight?”

“Eh? I think the udon is getting close to its expiration date. If I add some random decorations and boil it in a pot…”

“We had that three days ago!”

“Then what about chilled udon? That would be great for the summer.”

“That was exactly what we had for lunch five days ago!”

“Oh, c’mon!! Don’t use your perfect memory for things like this!!”

That girl named Index had the special talent of never forgetting anything she learned. That ability had been used to have her memorize every line and character of 103,000 grimoires from around the world. She now functioned as a grimoire library.

However, Kamijou tilted his head in puzzlement.

“But if you can remember everything perfectly, can’t you remember the flavor of a luxurious 8000 yen sukiyaki set while eating chilled udon and be perfectly happy?”

“Ch-chasing after that kind of empty happiness does not fill my stomach!”

“Then can’t you remember what it feels like to be full…?”

“That would make me the same kind of sad person as the lumberjack rejoicing because a fairy tricked him into thinking the sawdust and leaves are piles of gold. I don’t want-…”

Index suddenly trailed off.

That was due to a bright white flash of light.

That brilliant light shot up from one area of Academy City and vertically towards the heavens.

It shot higher than the buildings and then higher than the clouds.

“Hyah!? Wh-why does that keep happening!?”

“They’re rockets. You wouldn’t think they were being launched all the way over in District 23 given how bright the light is.”

The light caused at launch was so bright, a notification had been sent out warning drivers to be careful. Recently, they had been fired at a rate of about one every ten minutes.

The countless contrail-like trails of smoke created by the launches seemed to create a tower reaching up to heaven.

“Supposedly, the launches aren’t just coming from Academy City. There’s a rush to launch rockets from facilities all around the world. I hear there are about four hundred rockets entered in the Venus Probe Contest. Anyone is free to enter, from projects put together by the EU and other groups made up of multiple nations down to regional efforts run by local shopping districts.”

But no one could hope to rival Academy City on the technological front.

After all, the technological level inside and outside the city was said to have a difference of twenty to thirty years.

The other nations were seeing if they could use quantity to defeat the great technological quality of Academy City. That less-than-intelligent plan was the only one left to them.

But even so…

(What do they get if they win?)

There was the naming of a newly discovered asteroid or mountain on Venus, but the amateur high school student Kamijou Touma could not think of any real merit beyond being recorded as the first to discover it. He wondered if they would give it the name of a convenience store in order to advertise.

The project might not have had an obvious objective such as the retrieval of some new and unknown material that would revolutionize Earth's technology or contact with some aliens hiding behind the rocks.

Apparently, one of the most important efforts was to find materials altered by oil. The bodies of living creatures would break apart underground to form oil, so that discovery would prove creatures had lived there in the past. However, Kamijou was not sure what people gained by finding those traces of past creatures. Finding traces of rice in a rice bowl did not make that rice come back.

(This would be easier to understand if I could see something obvious people gained from this beyond simply making a historic discovery.)

Then again, if some obvious gain was found, it might change the field of space exploration from being about spectacular romance to being a fierce competition.

As Kamijou thought about all that, the girl next to him who lacked any scientific knowledge began trembling.

She said, "Y-you mean the science side has started to seize a portion of the stars that lie at the base of modern Western magic!? If the composition of the planets is changed, it would destroy the basic foundation of magic… But we will surely change to meet the demands of this age!! We will deal with this like the Japanese dealt with the arrival of ideas from the West!!"

"Um, hello?"

Kamijou tried to get a response from her, but Index seemed to be getting poor reception so she simply continued trembling.

Kamijou decided to just let her continue trembling. He looked blankly into the sky as a few more rockets were launched.

“But are they really launching four hundred of them? It seems like space debris would be a problem. If there is energy being emitted from Venus, won’t they start being repelled by a mountain of debris?”

Part 4

In the end, the biggest problem to deal with was what to have for dinner.

“No one ever plans things out in this age when they can just go get the ingredients at the supermarket right before making the meal.”

“The problem is that you are too careless, Touma. If you had a perfect memory like me, you wouldn’t need to keep an account book for household expenses!”

“Then how about you actually use that perfect memory of yours!? If you do, you’ll notice that the problem is that you eat any ingredients I try to stock up on!! That is why I can only buy ingredients for that day and that day alone!!”

And so Kamijou and Index entered a supermarket with the much too blunt name of “For the Athletic Type!!”

The white nun was known around the area as “the devourer”, so the old women running the samples areas began retreating when they saw her enter. However, Index did not seem interested in them.

“T-Touma! That flier says a blue-fin tuna dissection show is starting!”

“There is no way that is happening!! We just can’t!! Any kind of food prepared in the supermarket would destroy our budget. And what about that is athletic!?”

“DHA! I want DHA tonight!!”

“If that’s all you want, then take a supplement!! In fact, do you even know what that is!?”

Index tried to run off through the store, but Kamijou grabbed at the back of her neck to stop her. If he let that girl head off, he might be stuck having to solve the mystery of how a giant blue-fin tuna had disappeared from a completely sealed room.

“Index, we are here to get dinner for tonight. We are not looking for something to eat right now.”

“I see! So you’re telling me to find something even more delicious than blue-fin tuna!?”

Since he had no idea what that interpretation would lead to, Kamijou pretended to rub Index's head and locked on with an iron claw.

He then dragged her to the section carrying all the special deals of the day.

"T-Touma, why does this area seem to be filled with a dangerous smell!?"

"Unfortunately, that is the non-monetary price one must pay to get a good deal. If you want something that is 'guaranteed', you need to head to an organic shop!!"

"B-but look at this: 'Space Carrots! Such a surprising change in the carotene!' Doesn't that sound a bit ominous!?"

"Yes, it does seem a bit dangerous to just call it a 'surprising change'. I'm not even sure if it has more of it, less of it, or if the structure of the carotene itself has changed. But look at this wonderful price! Only the strange products that are partially covered with research funds can be this cheap!!"

"The word 'research' scares me! And you just admitted it was strange, didn't you, Touma!?"

"If it looks exactly like a carrot and tastes exactly like a carrot, then I say it must be made of the same stuff as a carrot. In other words…well, it's all the same in your stomach!!"

"W-wait, Touma! What am I supposed to do if it tastes like a melon!?"

"Then you'll know what it was talking about here."

"?"

"The surprising change to the carotene."

"I don't want a surprise!"

But Kamijou doubted the vegetables could be too dangerous if they had simply been grown on a space station.

Kamijou looked over at some other ingredients while ignoring Index who was trembling while looking into the shopping cart.

This is what he found.

"T-Touma. Did you even read this!? It says: 'Genetically Improved Lettuce #3. Three hundred different insects refuse to approach it. Sorry about #1 and #2!!' I can't trust this new technology of Academy City! What does it mean if not even bugs are willing to eat it? Really, what does it mean!? I want to know what exactly makes the bugs run away

from it!! And the fact that a #1 and #2 disappeared into the shadows of history clearly hints at a dangerous conclusion!!"

"…"

Even so, the research assistance made the price quite attractive.

The essence of a journey in search of meal ingredients was to cross the tightrope stretched between safety and budget.

And with that in mind, what was he to do here?

Part 5

Eventually, Kamijou and Index were released from the minor hell of the supermarket.

"We're having mizutaki tonight."

"I-I know what all the ingredients are, but I still feel the thrill of a yaminabe…"

The white nun seemed oddly disheartened despite the topic being food. It was an exceedingly rare situation, but Kamijou did not particularly mind.

And then…

"Huh? What are you doing here?" asked a middle school girl.

It was the girl Kamijou had met that morning.

She wore the uniform of the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School and was one of the only seven Level 5s in Academy City. She was the #3.

She was Misaka Mikoto.

"The two of you are walking together carrying supermarket bags…? What exactly are you two doing!?"

"You can't tell!?"

"So you're saying this is exactly what it looks like!? That's what you're saying!? And you were together this morning too!!"

"We were discussing whether carrots grown in space and lettuce that no insects will get anywhere near are actually safe to eat! Leave us alone, little girl!!"

“Eh? …What? So is this like a research project???” Mikoto was rather confused, so she simply gave her own opinion on the matter. “When they say insects won’t get near it, that isn’t because it is emitting insecticide from the leaves. It just tricks the insects by emitting a material similar to the pheromones that increase and decrease the insect’s hunger. The researchers only strengthened the defense mechanism the lettuce already had.”

“O-ohh…” groaned Index with a troubled look on her face.

Mikoto continued, “And even food not created in a test tube has its genetics altered in the form of selective breeding. Think of brand-name beef and rice. In fact, it would be hard to find food that hasn’t undergone cross breeding at some point. If you ignore all that and simply think of all genetic alterations as bad, you’ve left the realm of science. That would be more an issue of philosophy or religion.”

“Sh-Short Hair, I get the feeling you have completely fallen for the ideologies and dogma of science.”

But then Mikoto’s cell phone rang.

“Eh? Kuroko? …What? Wait, that’s actually really bad!”

She quickly hung up and looked over to Kamijou.

“The curfew is coming up soon, so you need to get back to your dorm right away!!”

“What?”

“Listen, *get back right now and do not leave your room!* Understand!?”

Having said that, Mikoto ran off somewhere.

(What was that all about?)

Kamijou tilted his head in confusion.

“Well, it’s nothing new for her to be acting oddly. Hey, Index. Let’s get home.”

“Hm…?”

Index looked in a different direction as if she had just noticed something.

Kamijou looked over in the same direction, but he didn’t see anything of interest. He simply saw the usual scenery of Academy City.

“What is it, Index?”

“Huh? I think I saw that same thing earlier.”

“Well, yeah. Those wind turbines are located all over the city.”

“No, not that. Hmm…Huh? That’s odd. It’s true that it’s one of those ‘turbine’ things, but…huh? It should be outside my area of expertise, but for some reason I feel like it’s connected to my knowledge…”

“Your knowledge?”

That meant it would be related to magic rather than science, but Kamijou doubted the turbines that supported Academy City’s power would use any knowledge or techniques related to that.

“I might be able to figure something out if I check the ‘turbine’ I saw before. T-Touma, you go home ahead of me!”

“Eh? Wait a second, Index!”

“And I won’t be mad if you eat all of that suspicious dinner on your own!!”

“Ah, wait! Don’t tell me you’re planning to get a burger on your way! You don’t have any money!!”

Kamijou doubted he could chase after her with the shopping bags that weighed several kilograms in both hands. He looked around and spotted a coin locker with a refrigeration function he could leave them in. In order to avoid any unnecessary expenses or trouble for society, he prepared to chase after Index. But then…

“?”

He saw something glint in the sun.

It was at the base of the wind turbine’s pillar.

“This is…?”

Only once he approached did he realize what it was. Some kind of thin, clear film had been attached to the surface of the round pillar. It was a rectangular optical filter about the size of a magazine. When he stared at it up close, he was able to see a strange pattern drawn on it with a slight color difference.

It was unclear what it meant, but it was unlike the sorts of diagrams and plans that Kamijou was familiar with.

And yet the pattern led him to suspect it had some sort of meaning even if he could not determine the specifics.

Ideology, religion, dogma.

It reminded him of those terms he had heard recently.

(But…)

Kamijou looked suspiciously at the wind turbine and examined the clear film attached to it.

(I get the feeling this filter isn't all there is to this. I feel like there is something else here.)

Had it been the filter that had stimulated Index's knowledge? Or was it the "other thing" that Kamijou was vaguely sensing?

(Either way, this filter is definitely something magical!)

Kamijou focused his thoughts on the small goal in front of him.

He stretched out his right hand.

He stretched out Imagine Breaker.

It was limited to his right wrist and beyond, but he possessed the power to destroy any supernatural power of either magical or esper nature.

His index finger touched the clear film.

In the next moment, the plastic-looking filter was smashed to countless tiny pieces with a dry bursting noise.

Something had been destroyed.

That meant the clear film had indeed used some sort of magic.

And just as that thought entered Kamijou's mind…

Several pillars of fire suddenly roared up around Kamijou.

"…Eh?"

Kamijou let out that confused voice, but the situation was not going to wait for his understanding to catch up. The flames that had shot up began raining down from above.

(Shit… That filter was a switch!?)

It may have looked like a giant maw if viewed from the side.

And that boy's body disappeared into the flames as if he was being devoured by that maw.

Part 6

A helicopter suddenly landed on the road while ignoring all regulations regarding heliports. It and the pilot were the extent of the "limited cooperation" from Academy City. The red-haired priest who stepped out sighed as he grasped the situation.

His name was Stiyl Magnus.

He was a magician dispatched by Necessarius, the 0th Parish of the Anglican Church.

"…So it was failure," he muttered.

The sea of flames was then instantaneously blown away with a great noise. When Kamijou Touma emerged from within, he was completely unscathed.

"What the hell are you doing!? Were those flames your doing!?"

"I won't deny that, but you were not the intended target. And now I must ask you the same question: what are you doing?" Stiyl used the cigarette held between the fingers of his right hand to point at the wind turbine Kamijou had just touched. "How much do you know about what was set up there?"

"You mean the clear filter you set up? But more importantly—!!"

"That is not all that is there," said Stiyl, cutting Kamijou off. "I used that filter as a new magic circle on top of the magic circle *that was already there*."

"…That was already there?"

"You can't see it?" Stiyl continued while Kamijou frowned in confusion. "Well, it isn't drawn using ink. The enemy probably used a powerful ultraviolet light. It's the same as how sunlight causes a poster to fade. They drew the circle by causing the paint on the pillar to fade slightly. Naturally, this method violates the treaty between magic and science."

Kamijou looked more closely at the wind turbine, but he still could not see anything like that. It must have been possible to create a magic circle with alterations so small an amateur could not see them.

“And why do you think I attached that magic circle made from special ink on a clear material? It was to interfere with…or rather, overwrite their circle. By adding my own circle on top, I could destroy their pattern. And when the pattern changes, the effects of the circle change. If I alter the effects the maker of the circle wanted, they will attempt to remove the filter I attached. Then when the trap activates, I can capture this hidden person…or so it should have gone.”

“Wait a second. Are you saying someone other than you did something to this wind turbine?”

“Yes. And?”

“And the trap you set to catch them activated in vain…”

“That would be thanks to you.”

“Doesn’t that mean this magician is now aware of the trap?”

“You only just now caught on to that fact?” muttered Stiyl as he tossed his cigarette away.

A flame sword shot out forcefully along the path of the cigarette.

“But it was my own fault for not eliminating a known concern. I knew there was a risk of an ignorant amateur messing everything up.”

“Stiyl…!?”

“The situation is urgent. And your actions here has upped the rank of the urgency,” said the red-haired priest with a light tone despite holding a weapon that could easily kill. “I do not have the time or the desire to deal with uncertain elements. Really, I should probably just kill you, but I will stop at simply beating some sense into you.”

Part 7

Kamijou Touma’s Imagine Breaker was limited to his right hand, but it could negate any magic or esper power. That of course meant it functioned as the natural enemy of those who wielded such supernatural powers, but his level of danger changed greatly depending on if it was his first fight with someone or a subsequent one.

Simply put, once the enemy knew about his ability, they could build up a strategy around it.

“First, I will not enter the striking range of your fist.” Stiyl took a step backwards. “And I will repeat attacks that cause definite damage to wear you down bit by bit.”

He swung his flame sword and caused it to explode to send shockwaves scattering.

Naturally, the damage done was greater the closer one was to the center of the explosion. Using the attack at a distance like that would lessen its destructive power and make it difficult to use effectively.

But he did not care.

He would wear Kamijou down little by little until he could no longer fight.

“Tch. So you had rune cards hidden around the turbine from the beginning!?”

“If I did not, this would not have been a very effective trap. The first wave keeps the target in place while I move quickly to the scene. Then, I would have finished off the target while their movements were dulled.”

Kamijou guessed Stiyl must have put a lot of thought into the placement of the runes. The spot Stiyl currently stood in and the routes he would move along would have meaning.

If Kamijou tried to simply charge toward him, something like a barricade might appear to block his path.

“Fighting on a stage you prepared ahead of time simply puts me at the disadvantage.”

“Then what will you do?”

“Run away,” he replied immediately.

Kamijou Touma then turned tail and ran as quickly as he could.

It may have looked foolish at first, but it was a decent choice for a battle against Stiyl. The magician’s magic was most effective on a field on which a large number of rune cards had been set up, so if he left that prepared field, Stiyl could no longer use his full power. That alone was not enough to defeat Stiyl, but it would give him the opening he would need for an attack.

However…

“Did you really think I wouldn’t have thought of that when setting up this trap?”

Kamijou heard the roar of flames consuming oxygen as a pillar of fire shot up to block his path. He frantically stopped as that pillar took the form of a giant human.

It was Innocentius.

That spell had the greatest destructive power out of all of Stiyl Magnus's spells. On a field supplied with rune cards, that mass of three-thousand-degree-Celsius flames could immediately regenerate and attack no matter how many times it was destroyed.

Kamijou Touma's right hand could destroy it, but it would simply regenerate as soon as he did. If Innocentius stopped him there, Stiyl could freely move to attack.

But…

"Isn't it a bit early to be using your greatest technique?"

"?"

"After all." Kamijou Touma grinned. "If you don't place it in between us, I can negate all the other magic you use as I run straight for you."

What Kamijou had been afraid of was that Stiyl could always use that "greatest technique".

But now that it was already being used, he could find a way around it.

After all…

"I've never heard anything about you being able to use more than Innocentius at a time. …You haven't made any advances since the last time I saw you, have you?"

"!?"

Stiyl frantically tried to give further instructions, but it was too late.

Kamijou turned around 180 degrees and immediately ran straight for Stiyl. Innocentius pursued Kamijou from behind, but it was not fast enough to move in between him and Stiyl. No matter what traps might lie between them, Kamijou could negate them all with his right hand as long as they were not Innocentius class. The red-haired priest detonated his flame sword again and again to hold the boy back, but the distant shockwaves were not enough to completely stop Kamijou.

And…

By the time Kamijou was in range of the full effects of the flame sword's shockwaves, his right hand could reach the priest. He threw his fist towards the flame sword swinging towards him and negated the magic.

And that meant…

Kamijou's foot slammed powerfully down right up in front of Stiyl.

He poured his full weight into his tightly clenched right fist. In the follow through of the strike on the flame sword, his fist flew forcefully for the tall priest's jaw.

But then…

The great noise and impact that Stiyl had been expecting did not come.

"…Why did you stop?"

"Is there really any reason for us to be fighting?" replied Kamijou immediately.

The fist that had stopped right in front of Stiyl's face moved once more and lightly tapped Stiyl on the jaw.

Part 8

It had either taken Index a while to notice the disturbance or she had been obstructed by some kind of trap because she only arrived after it was all over.

"Touma! Why are you fighting a magician again while I was off investigating the magic circle at the base of these 'turbines'!?"

"That's right. Thanks to this boy intruding once again, we at Necessarius are even busier than we were before."

"I'm mad at you too! You're an expert magician, so how can you go all out against an amateur like Touma!?"

When Index yelled at him, Stiyl quickly turned his back and shrugged.

Because he had turned his back, Kamijou was unable to see what expression was on his face.

Kamijou was not sure he wanted to know.

And so he intentionally changed to subject.

"Stiyl, who is this magician you're after? What are they trying to do in this city?"

"Do you feel responsible because you ruined my trap?"

"No, you idiot. This is our city."

Stiyl clicked his tongue.

Stiyl must have managed to compose himself because he turned around before speaking.

“The enemy this time is a magic cabal that uses Hindu mythology. It is known as the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens. It is a small organization of only about fifty people, but that means the individual members’ pure ideologies will not throw the entire group into disarray. In other words, it would be difficult to invite any of them to compromise which makes them quite dangerous. …Their characteristic trait is their method of training their physical bodies to the limit using extreme exercises, fasting, and the like. And that is also one of the reasons behind their conflict with Academy City.”

“?”

“The scientific training methods Academy City has developed calculate out the optimal values for eating, exercising, and resting. To a magic cabal that views pain that exceeds one’s limits as the path to a body that exceeds its limits, Academy City may look like a cowardly group taking the easy route to strength.”

“So these people who take issue with Academy City have snuck into the city and drawn magic circles on wind turbines all over the place? …That can only be bad.”

“It is unclear how far they have progressed, but they are most likely using Agni’s Festival Fire. It is the same method used to attack a large sports gym in New Delhi two years ago.” Despite his casual tone, Stiyl informed them of something very, very bad. “Agni is associated with fire and lightning and they are using him as their symbol. Simply put, the spell allows them to alter the output of the electromagnetic waves that are normally flying every which way. They can use that to cause a large scale disaster. …If they activate Agni’s Festival Fire on this scale, Academy City will be turned into a giant microwave oven.”

CHAPTER 2

Part 1

The magician named Stiyl Magnus said, “A Hindu magic cabal has entered Academy City. Its name is the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens. Due to what they stand to gain and their ideologies, they wish to oppose this city.”

Kamijou Touma slowly opened and closed his right hand.

“What was it you said they put on the pillars of the wind turbines? Agni’s Festival Fire?”

“What they have set up on the individual turbines is no more than a single part of what makes up the whole of the Agni’s Festival Fire spell. The network created by these countless circles linking together is the true identity of Agni’s Festival Fire.” Stiyl plainly looked irritated that Kamijou was still confused. “You could say its effect is to greatly amplify the output of the electromagnetic waves that are constantly flying about. If the spell is activated, the area in its effective range will turn into a giant microwave oven. It is unknown at this time how wide that area is.”

Stiyl pointed at Kamijou’s face.

And without hesitation, he said the following:

“And your right hand has destroyed the trap I set to capture them. The cabal has likely detected that something has happened.”

“Then I just need to use my right hand to destroy the spiritual items that make up Agni’s Festival Fire!!”

“I just said it is unknown how far it has spread,” said Stiyl casually. “The only reason they have not done anything yet is because they need further preparations to crush all of Academy City. But they can use Agni’s Festival Fire at any time if they are fine with an incomplete result. And depending on how much they have set up, that ‘incomplete result’ might be enough to roast an entire district or two. The magic cabal is holding back due to greed. They think they can still recover. If the symbols for Agni’s Festival Fire start being destroyed one after another, they will likely decide an incomplete result is better than no result at all.”

“Then what are we supposed to do? If we know Agni’s Festival Fire is spreading even now, we can’t just do nothing.”

“The most effective method was lost thanks to your hand. But that does not mean I have no hints left. The accuracy of the information is much lower, but I have no choice but to rely on it.” Stiyl clicked his tongue before continuing. “I cannot be worried about appearances at a time like this. I don’t like it, but I will be using you as one of the cards in my deck.”

Part 2

And then the following day arrived.

“Due to the Venus Probe Contest, rockets are being launched one after another from countries around the world.”

“But the hydrazine used for fuel is incredibly toxic, so I am worried about an accident occurring in Academy City when the fuel is being loaded or transported in the front container portion.”

“All drivers should be careful because of the intense light of the rocket launches. It is recommended you wear sunglasses.”

The flow of time was always equal, so today would come no matter what happened the previous day. Kamijou could not sit around sleepily watching TV forever. He had to make breakfast and head off to school.

But even if his schedule continued silently on as normal, his mental state would not always be the same.

“Um, I am sure all of you know the difference between ESP and PK, but we have a midterm coming up soon. I want to explain any of the areas that people often get mixed up.”

The 135 cm female teacher named Tsukuyomi Komoe was stretching up as high as she could to write on the chalkboard, but Kamijou was ignoring her and looking at his right hand.

(According to Stiyl, they can use Agni’s Festival Fire at any time if they ignore the ultimate goal they are working towards.)

“Now, about thoughtography. As the power allows you to learn of distant or future scenes, it seems that it would be categorized under ESP just like precognition. However, the power that affects the film is a physical one, so it is a power that influences an object external to oneself. For that reason, thoughtography is technically not classified as ESP but as PK just like telekinesis and fire creation! That one is often used as a trick question, so be careful! When a power sits on both sides of the boundary between ESP and PK, PK takes precedence in classification!!”

(The district we live in could become a sea of flames at any moment. Everyone could be roasted to death. I have a means of destroying the spiritual items set up on the wind turbines, so why can I only sit around and wait for a better opportunity to arrive?)

Kamijou had no idea where the priest had gotten it, but Stiyl had given him a prepaid cell phone. In other words, Kamijou was waiting for Stiyl to call. It seemed the priest would rather die than exchange phone numbers.

“Also, analog cameras that use film exposure have been on the decline in recent years due to the arrival of digital cameras. This has created the problem of whether espers who display the future on digital cameras should be treated as having the same type of thoughtography! As I just said, the main point of the thoughtography is not the future aspect but the photograph part. So if the method of taking and displaying the photograph is completely different…”

(But this magic cabal in Academy City…what was it called? The Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens, was it? Stiyl said he would find them, but how? What if he doesn’t find them…?)

“U-um…Kamijou-chan? Kamijou-chan!”

“Uwah?”

“That goes beyond just not paying attention! I have been trying to give a final review before the midterm, but…wah! The bell just rang!?”

At the same moment as the bell rang to signify the end of class, the classroom door flew open.

The door made a ridiculously loud noise and then a white nun shouted out.

“Komoe, Komoe!! I want you to teach me about something called ‘electromagnetic waves’!!”

“Why did you come all the way to school, nun-chan!? Ahh! I get the feeling I will not be able to extend class time little by little now…!!”

Index did not want to start talking about magic cabals and Agni’s Festival Fire in the classroom, so she pushed Kamijou and Komoe-sensei out into the hall.

“Kamijou-chan! You are responsible for supervising her actions! And why am I being treated as a member of some strange journey!?”

“That doesn’t matter! I just need you to explain this ‘electromagnetic wave’ thing! Why does it make the TV go zap zap zap and make things explode in a microwave oven!?”

“Televisions do not zap things and microwaves ovens do not make things explode!”

“I see,” commented Kamijou. “I had thought you were being surprisingly quiet for something related to magic. I guess hearing about magic that ups the output of electromagnetic waves just didn’t click with you.”

When the base of the issue was related to science, the knowledge of the grimoires may not have been enough to understand.

“I-I feel like I am being left behind!” exclaimed Komoe-sensei. “And am I just imagining a hint of danger hidden between your words!?”

But as Index continued to pester her, Komoe-sensei began explaining electromagnetic waves and microwave ovens. Kamijou decided she was a truly caring person to actually go through with it.

“Basically, electromagnetic waves are invisible waves. They have a set amplitude, so they can cause a stable vibration in micro-level objects. A microwave oven is a device that applies heat to food by vibrating the moisture in it at high speed.”

“Vibrating the water makes it hotter!?”

Index looked completely amazed. She twisted the faucet for the drinking fountain in the hallway and started slapping the water pouring out back and forth.

But then her expression grew cloudy and she pouted her lips.

“…It isn’t even getting warm.”

“Eh? Um, nun-chan? That is not what I meant.”

“Sigh. I didn’t think you were this stupid, Komoe. I came all this way for help and you were no use at all…”

“K-Kamijou-chan!? Everything I said was correct, wasn’t it!? Do something about this improper assessment!!”

Komoe-sensei was begging him for help, but Kamijou felt the optimal way of handling the situation was to simply watch the situation play out rather than forcing his way into it.

But he did give one comment.

“In other words, the ‘zap zap zap’ of the microwave is a type of lightning. But it burns you instead of shocking you. It would be bad if that happened to everyone in the city, so we’re gonna stop them.”

“I see!! I guess you would be burned if you got hit by lightning! Now that I know that, I can find plenty of similar descriptions in my 103,000 grimoires!! You really are smart, Touma.”

“Huh!? I get the feeling you are heading on without correcting the mistake! And Kamijou-chan, I think you just casually said more dangerous things…!”

Since he did not want to bother with answering her questions, Kamijou mentally pushed Komoe-sensei’s voice aside.

“But Stiyl still hasn’t called. I can’t believe I can’t do anything despite being able to destroy the magic with my right hand.”

“Hey, Touma.”

“What?”

“Come to think of it, is this Stiyl person really the type to keep his word and call if something happens?”

(…Huh?)

Kamijou Touma physically froze in place for a moment, but he finally squeezed the prepaid phone tightly in his right hand.

“That bastard!! Did he have me wait for his call in order to keep me from doing anything else!?”

“He *was* saying your right hand and tendency to take action were in the way.”

“He headed out on his own when we don’t even know how many enemies there are! This is no time to be worrying about the distinction between expert and amateur! Index, help me out here. We need to find out where that bastard is!!”

“Touma, I don’t think you have any right to complain about someone heading into danger on his own.”

“Eh…um…Kamijou-chan? Kamijou-chaaan!! Everything you have been talking about sounds very dangerous! And how can you possibly start blatantly leaving school right in front of your teacher!? Wait!!”

Part 3

Stiyl Magnus was pursuing the magic cabal known as the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens.

He might have to continually fight an unknown number of magicians all on his own. And if that fight grew unfavorable for those enemies, they could activate Agni's Festival Fire that had been set up around Academy City to turn the entire city into a giant microwave oven.

Kamijou had run straight out of school, but…

"Argh, where is that bastard anyway!? Index, can you use your magical knowledge to figure out where they might gather?"

"Hmm… The fastest way is probably to investigate the magic circles making up Agni's Festival Fire. If the two forces clash, it will be around them."

"But those circles are set up on the turbines all across the city, right? How are we supposed to figure out which one they'll focus on?"

"Despite having all those circles, the number of magic users is limited. There is sure to be a center controlling all the others that function as terminals. And anyone who wants to either use or destroy Agni's Festival Fire will head to the center."

"So is it something like a host server?"

"Host?"

Index looked confused.

But if all of those circles set up around the city were controlled by a single central point, every single terminal needed to be connected to that center. They might be able to find the center's location by investigating a terminal.

"But this isn't like the internet. How does the center send commands to the terminals?"

"…Let me investigate the spiritual item in question."

Index stared intently at the base of the wind turbine's pillar.

A magic circle was supposedly drawn there using the fading effect of ultraviolet light. Kamijou could not see the slight difference, but it seemed she could.

"He said this is a Hindu cabal, and it appears this is related to Shiva at the root."

"?"

"Shiva is said to be the god of dance that creates everything that flows through the universe. It is said his great power disturbing the great universe is what causes the stars to move."

"So does Agni's Festival Fire use some kind light or power related to the universe as a communications signal? Or is related to the sun and moon? Maybe it uses gravity or solar winds. The scale of this just grew a lot, didn't it?"

"No, Shiva is a god that rules over everything that flows, whether it is large or small. He is related even to everything nearby such as water and smoke."

"The things that flow nearby…?"

Kamijou thought for a bit and then looked upwards.

What was it the magic cabal had drawn the magic circles for Agni's Festival Fire on?

Wind turbines.

"Does it use the flow of the wind!?"

"Yes. The movements of all of the 'turbines' lined up along here are slightly different. And Shiva has a strong connection to Rudra, a god of roaring wind. The center and the terminals likely use the flow of the wind to communicate."

"Index, can you determine the location of the center from the movements of the turbines?"

"Leave it to me."

Part 4

Kamijou followed Index's lead and they found themselves in business district of District 7. However, this was not a line of giant buildings in which financial activities from around the world were collected. Instead, it was a fairly grimy looking place filled with small multi-tenant buildings.

"The Beehive, hm? It is the perfect place for a hideout."

"?"

“Officially, this area is supposed to be rented out as business facilities, but the tenant review process is incredibly lax. Girls who have run away from home use these places as cheap apartments, people use them as cages for large and dangerous pets, people use them as workshops for creating eavesdropping devices and the like, and cults not recognized as proper religious organizations use them as their home base.”

People came and went from the place constantly, and a lease could be obtained just by visiting a website. Supposedly, the people running it often did not really know who was using the rooms or how.

Plus, people would also break into empty rooms to use them without a lease.

“So, Index, do you know more specifically where the center of Agni’s Festival Fire is?”

“Y-yes. It is in that yellow building over there.”

As soon as Index pointed at the building, orange flames burst from a window.

Kamijou was standing a good ways away, but he still felt an impact on his face like he had been slapped. The sound of breaking glass could be heard repeatedly from all around him.

He would have been in a much worse state had he been at the center of the blast, though.

But what exactly had happened?

“Flames…? Did Stiyl do this!?”

As soon as he said that, Kamijou recalled that Agni’s Festival Fire could produce effects similar to a microwave oven.

Which side had done this?

He could not be certain even of that.

“Not good. We need to hurry, Index!!”

“Y-yeah!!”

In the time it took Kamijou to run the several dozen meters to the building, several further explosions occurred within the same building. He was very nearly knocked to the ground, but he somehow managed to reach the base of the building.

The sound of someone running across metal could be heard from the emergency staircase.

Kamijou frantically looked in that direction, but whoever had been there was already gone.

But just for an instant, he had seen some long black cloth disappear around the corner.

(…Stiyl?)

It had looked like his outfit, but he could not be sure.

Kamijou turned his gaze away from the corner the figure had disappeared around and back towards the emergency staircase.

“He escaped from there?”

Who had it been? And where had the person gone?

Kamijou looked back towards the main road, but then he heard a creaking sound from overhead. He looked up and frantically leaped out of the way.

A sign wrapped in flames had fallen down.

With a heavy crash, sparks flew in every direction.

And then Kamijou started thinking once more.

Should he head towards the main road in pursuit and give up on finding any kind of hint here?

Or should he head into the building in search of a small hint that might not even be there?

(I have no idea if anyone is inside the building.)

At first glance, it appeared he had two options.

(But to look at it another way, that means there could still be someone in there!)

Kamijou made up his mind immediately.

He spoke to Index who had only just now caught up.

“I’m heading inside! I don’t know how far the flames have spread. You wait out here, Index!!”

“What are you saying!? You have no magical knowledge, so you would have no idea what is important if you went in on your own, Touma!!”

In the end, both of them charged into the building.

From outside, it had only looked like orange flames were coming from the windows. But inside, the scene completely changed. The air seemed to burn the skin like in a sauna and over half of their vision was covered by black smoke. The flames had eaten through the thin interior walls and ceiling, so the layout no longer matched the diagram on the wall.

“Cough, cough!!”

“Index! You need to head back!!”

“But it’s meaningless for you to go on your own!!”

“Then crouch down and cover your mouth with a handkerchief. Try to avoid getting caught in the smoke!!”

The two of them were supposedly inside a fairly small building, but their sense of direction and distance were thrown off so badly that it felt like they were walking through a pitch black forest. It soon became unclear if they were heading further inside or towards the exit.

The one piece of good luck was that it seemed no one had been left behind in the flames.

Had no one but the magic cabal been in the building from the beginning? Or had they or Stiyl used a people-clearing field?

“There’s a rune card,” said Index suddenly.

Something was melted to the wall where she pointed. The other side of the wall had become a sea of flames and the wall might have been as hot as a frying pan. While making sure not to touch it, Kamijou spoke what was on his mind.

“So does that mean it was Stiyl that did this?”

It appeared he had an answer, but that did not change the situation.

Kamijou and Index headed up the stairs.

Smoke travelled upwards, so the black smoke grew thicker and thicker as they approached their destination floor. The heat also seemed to increase. This was clearly not an environment in which humans could stay for long.

“Touma, it’s that room!!” shouted Index as she pointed at a half-opened door.

This would be where the explosion had occurred.

Kamijou kicked the door open while preparing himself for the sea of flames that awaited him on the other side, but he found something completely unexpected when he looked inside.

“The fire…hasn’t gotten here yet?”

The walls, floor, and ceiling of that room and that room alone were pristine. Not only was there no sign of the flames, no smoke could be seen either. Even things like plastic bags that would melt easily had maintained their original form.

(At least no one failed to escape and got caught in the flames. But what is this?)

Kamijou frowned and entered the room, but his right hand destroyed something as soon as he did.

A large amount of smoke suddenly entered the room.

“Wah!?”

“Touma, I think the explosion itself occurred in this room. But since Agni is the god of fire and lightning, they used those properties to send the flames away from the room! The flames were sent to the other rooms on the same floor and out the window!! They might have used some kind of curse evasion or something!!”

And he had destroyed that.

Which was why the flames and smoke were now entering.

“Dammit. This place isn’t going to last long.”

It did not seem anyone was hiding within the small room.

The place did not even have the bare minimum of furniture. It had a table and a few folding chairs. And in one corner was a square safe about the size of a washing machine.

Instead of further furniture, the walls were absolutely covered with paper. Some were just small memos and some were the size of A2 posters. One was a map of Academy City with red dots all over it, one had some kind of string of numbers on it, and one was a picture of what looked like hieroglyphs with no sense of distance or three-dimensionality.

The memos were not written in kanji or the alphabet. Instead, they were scribbled out in some kind of limply curving script. Kamijou could not read it, but he assumed it was the kind of writing used in India.

He turned to Index for help.

“Is this map of Academy City related to the wind turbines?”

“Some of these are drawings of Hindu gods. But this is…”

Just as Index stretched her hand out toward a scrap of paper on the wall, it grew black.

No strange occult power had activated.

Heat had passed through from the other side of the wall and scorched the wallpaper and the scraps of paper attached to it.

Before Kamijou had time to think, the wall burst into flames.

“Not good! The flames are going to consume this room!!”

“Touma, what should we do? I can use my perfect memory to reproduce that scrap of paper later. If there is nothing else you want here, we should escape as soon as possible!!”

“Wait.” Kamijou thought for a moment. “This is the center of Agni’s Festival Fire, right? If we destroy it, the magic cabal won’t be able to activate the spell. I want to make sure I negate it! Can you tell what is likely the center!?”

“The other wall! There’s a small version of those ‘turbines’ there. It has the same symbol they have used for Agni’s Festival Fire!!”

“I see. The ventilation fan!”

The ventilation fan was barely functioning due to all the black smoke. Kamijou reached up and stuck his right hand inside.

He felt something break to pieces within.

“I destroyed it!”

“Touma, we need to get out of here!”

Kamijou began to head for the exit at Index’s insistence, but then he stopped.

“Touma!”

“Wait.”

Kamijou looked back through the room.

His gaze landed on the safe the size of a washing machine in the corner.

Since they could not look inside, they could not use Index's perfect memory to "bring its contents out with them" in the form of a memory.

They would be left with no clue where the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens had fled to.

Kamijou wanted any information they could get that might help them pursue the cabal.

"No, Touma! You can't carry something that big with you! If you get greedy, you won't be able to escape the flames and smoke!!"

"I just have to get it out without carrying it with me."

Kamijou grabbed the edge of the safe with both hands and tried to push it.

It was incredibly heavy, but it was not held in place with any kind of earthquake-resistant latch. Ignoring the damage he did to the floor, Kamijou moved the safe bit by bit as if dragging it.

He was not moving it toward the door.

He was headed for the window.

"Good. No one's down below."

"Touma, what are you doing!?"

"Dropping it from the window, of course!!"

The distance from the floor to the windowsill was only about seventy centimeters, but that seventy centimeters seemed like hell. The safe was so heavy he thought his fingers would be ripped off. The bones of his waist and lower back felt like they were going to explode. And all the while, smoke was continuing to fill the room.

He somehow managed to get the safe up onto the windowsill and then pushed it off. Once it had escaped the bonds of its own weight, the safe fell straight down.

A tremendous sound of destruction rang out.

Kamijou and Index ran for the door.

"Let's go, Index!"

They of course could not use the elevator. They headed down the stairwell that seemed to have become a giant smokestack. However, they could not move very quickly because they could not see very well. If they misstepped and sprained or broken an ankle, they would be unable to escape the flames.

It was a horrible time.

It could not have lasted even ten minutes, but it felt like it had taken years off their lives.

But they had managed to escape alive.

The two practically fell out of the main entrance to the building.

It felt like ages since they had last breathed in a proper amount of oxygen.

“Cough, cough… Dammit. How much misfortune can I run across!?”

Finally, they started to hear the siren of a fire truck in the distance.

“Touma, what do we do now?”

“We check that safe.”

“Do you know the combination? Do I need to write down all of the strings of numbers I saw in that room?”

“No.”

Kamijou approached the spot where the safe had landed.

It was the old style of safe that had a dial and lever on the door. He tried to spin the dial and it spun easily. Too easily. It seemed the inner parts had broken.

“This thing is really tough, but not tough enough to withstand that impact.”

He pulled the lever.

The door easily opened.

“The contents are still inside, Touma!”

“The attack must have been too sudden for them to retrieve them.”

After grabbing the notebooks and documents inside, Kamijou and Index finally breathed a sigh of relief.

“If these specify another hideout or method of escape, we might be able to lie in wait for them.”

Even if Agni’s Festival Fire was no longer usable, dangerous magicians were still inside the city. They needed to deal with that problem even if it took some time.

But then Index said the last thing Kamijou wanted to hear.

"...Touma, look at that 'wind turbine'."

"What about it?"

"It's moving based on a certain set of rules. Agni's Festival Fire is still active!!"

"But I just destroyed the center in that ventilation fan, didn't I!?"

"They may be able to switch to a backup center or they may have a spiritual item that rewrites a terminal as a new center. At any rate, destroying that was not enough to stop Agni's Festival Fire!!"

"Not good..." muttered Kamijou. His voice soon rose to a shout. "Stiyl physically tracked down and cornered the magic cabal. And the enemy magicians most likely detected that I destroyed the center of Agni's Festival Fire. They aren't going to have any leeway left. They might decide to activate Agni's Festival Fire even in its current incomplete state!!"

And even that incomplete state might be able to roast a district or two depending on how much progress they had made.

Kamijou and Index did not have time to slowly think things over.

In the time it took to explain the situation to the firefighters as witnesses of the fire, some district of the city could be annihilated.

"Let's go, Index," said Kamijou as he forcibly moved his weary body. "We don't have time! If we don't defeat the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens here, the situation will pass the point of no return!!"

"Go where, Touma!?"

"Ugh."

Kamijou spread the documents and notebooks he was holding across the road surface. They had come from that safe. They likely contained information related to the magic cabal, but they did not use kanji or the alphabet. Kamijou could find no clue how to decipher them.

"Index, can you tell what these say?"

"Instructions in case of emergency, choices for escape routes, and means of spotting pursuers... A few different symbols are given here. It seems they can casually draw them out while on the run to inform the others where to go if normal communications are unusable."

“So if we follow those symbols, we’ll be led straight to the magicians!?”

“No, wait! There are also symbols to say whether something is a trap or not, so it is too dangerous to simply follow them!” Index quickly read through the writing in one of the notebooks. “They have three stages for losing any pursuers. If a pursuer gets too close, they will charge into a crowd and cause a disturbance to send a wall of people in the direction they want.”

An explosive noise roared in the distance

Kamijou and Index exchanged a glance and began running towards it.

Part 5

As they rushed in the direction of the explosion they had heard, Kamijou asked Index a question.

“Which side is this!? Did the magic cabal do this!?”

“It might have been the Anglican Church,” said Index cautiously. “This people-clearing field is only keeping people from approaching. People outside of it can see and hear the explosion, but they are unable to reach the actual location. This version was likely created to minimize the burden so it can be used on the move!”

But with Index’s knowledge and Kamijou’s right hand, the odds were good they could ignore the restrictions of the people-clearing field.

At any rate, they had to head in the direction of the explosion.

It was unclear which direction Stiyl would head after causing the explosion, but meeting up with him as soon as possible took top priority.

With that thought, Kamijou and Index ran along the asphalt road.

But something happened before they had travelled even three hundred meters.

It began with a noise.

It was a small dry sound of something bursting.

The actual event happened immediately afterwards.

“Wah!?”

“Watch out!!”

Giant flames suddenly spread out above their heads at about the height of a three-story building. A stinging pain spread across their skin, but that was the least of their worries. The damage spread beyond them. The windows on the buildings along the road shattered. A shower of shards rained down.

Coming to a stop would have the opposite effect.

Index’s legs were cramping up, so Kamijou grabbed her arm and forced them both onwards. The spot they had stood in a moment before was swallowed up by flames and glass.

“What was that? An explosion? Who’s targeting us!?”

Kamijou finally turned around once he had found his way to a safe area.

But they did not have time to leisurely discuss the cause.

They heard the same noise as before.

“Shit!!”

This time it came from an alley to the side. Flames suddenly spewed from a supposedly empty area and blew a plastic bucket and cleaning robot to pieces.

It was a powerful strike, but it did not directly affect Kamijou and Index like the previous one.

“Is their aim not all that accurate?”

And something else had caught their attention.

Just before the explosion…

“Touma, I saw some kind of bluish-white lightning!”

“So even though it’s flames, the method is different from Stiyl’s? Is this the magic cabal amplifying the electromagnetic waves!?”

“There’s that sound like fireworks again, Touma! It’s Agni’s Festival Fire!!”

“Dammit. We need to run!!”

Flames exploded out again and again with only a short break in between. The accuracy was poor, but they had no way of predicting where it would come from next. It seemed it would be difficult to defend against with any kind of shield, so their only option was to run as fast as they could away from that small bursting sound.

"Touma, the source of the explosion has been getting closer and closer to us since the first one. Their aim is improving little by little!"

"If it reaches us, we're done for…" An unpleasant feeling ran down Kamijou's spine as he continued to run. "An opponent facing you head on like Stiyl is one thing, but how is this enemy targeting us so well!? We may be chasing after them, but they shouldn't even know who we are!"

"Touma, you destroyed the center of Agni's Festival Fire at that building. If that information was automatically sent to the enemy, it would make sense for them to give top priority to destroying you! I do not have enough information to determine whether they were merely informed of the danger or if this is an auto-intercept spell that does not need a magic user!!"

"You've gotta be kidding me… But the enemy magicians are on the run from Stiyl, so how could they search out our loca-…?"

Kamijou trailed off because a sudden thought had come to him.

The burning building they had entered before had been the magic cabal's base.

In that case…

"They might have had some kind of spiritual item that they can remote control. If they are using it to monitor our situation…"

An explosion occurred overhead.

Mixed in with the concrete dust that rained down were the remnants of some kind cloth and wooden sticks.

The parts Kamijou saw led him to guess they came from a handmade model airplane.

"…Can magicians these days use UAVs?"

"U…A…? I don't know what that is, but this was likely a reconnaissance spiritual item using the symbols of the god Garuda!"

"And *I* don't know who or what this Garuda is!"

Even after the enemy's reconnaissance spiritual item was destroyed in their own blast, the explosions continued to intermittently pursue Kamijou and Index.

It seemed the spiritual item was not needed once the enemy knew where they were.

While they continued to run because they were not allowed to remain still, Kamijou almost groaned as he said, “They can keep targeting us no matter where we run. And the accuracy of the explosions is getting better and better. At this rate, we’ll be cornered!!”

It seemed Stiyl and someone else were still fighting in some other place, because intermittent explosions could be heard in the distance. And it seemed that fight was growing closer to Kamijou and Index.

“…Is an enemy magician being driven towards us?”

“Touma, we will be unable to escape the explosions within twenty minutes at this rate. We need to find and defeat the enemy magician before that happens!”

They did not have time to just stand idly by.

This crossing of paths was probably their first and last chance.

From the intensity of the distant explosions they assumed were being caused by Stiyl, they seemed to be closing in on them. Kamijou wondered if the others could hear the explosions occurring near him and Index.

They were approaching each other without being able to see each other.

Five hundred meters.

Four hundred meters.

Three hundred meters.

Two hundred meters.

One hundred meters.

And…

“Around that corner!!”

Kamijou tightly clenched his right fist once more and charged around the corner.

That was when something unexpected happened.

“Kyah!?”

He ran into a silver-haired girl of about middle school age who let out that high-pitched shriek. She was wearing a white short-sleeve sailor uniform with a blue pleated miniskirt. Both the shirt and the skirt were very short. Kamijou had the feeling her brown belly and ass would be visible if she simply stood around normally. The girl immediately drew back and dropped the paper bag she held in both hands.

(Not good. She's going to get wrapped up in-...!)

"No, Touma! A normal person could never continue acting normally within an Anglican people-clearing field!!"

"Eh...?"

Kamijou was left speechless and then he saw Stiyl pursuing the girl from behind.

The priest would be using the simplified people-clearing field for the area around him. If that girl was not affected by it...

"I'm sorry."

Kamijou heard an unpleasant bursting noise.

"But once you make yourself an enemy, the distinction between expert and amateur doesn't matter."

In the next instant, Kamijou was swallowed up by an explosive noise.

Part 6

Kamijou immediately held his right hand up in front of his face, but he did not have an actual plan. He did not even know what he should negate when faced with an explosion that suddenly appeared out of thin air. If the explosion caused by amplified electromagnetic waves was nothing more than a physical phenomenon caused as a result of what the spell had done, his right hand would be blown off.

However, Kamijou survived.

But not because his right hand had negated the explosion caused by the enemy magician.

The explosion that had occurred right in front of him had not been caused by the nearby girl. It had come from the flame sword held by Stiyl Magnus as he approached from behind her.

He would defeat his enemy.

He had given that priority and sent the shockwave to strike both Kamijou and the enemy magician.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!?”

He did not even have time to utter a question.

Kamijou and the magician girl were knocked to the asphalt. Kamijou was shaken so hard he was temporarily unable to tell up from down or remember what had just happened. But with his vision on its side, he managed to see the girl stand up before he could.

“Wait!!”

He immediately reached out a hand to grab at the girl’s leg, but she stomped on the back of his hand with the other leg. A short cry came from Kamijou’s mouth, but his attempt had not been wholly fruitless.

She must have put a lot of strength into the attack because something fell out of her pocket. It was an electronic device halfway between a cell phone and a data terminal.

The girl looked back at the fallen device for an instant.

“Tch!!”

But then she gave a cautious glance around the area and ran off. She ran as quickly as she could, leaving Kamijou still collapsed on the ground.

She was going to get away.

As soon as Kamijou thought that, Stiyl raced right past him without speaking a word.

The priest was treating him as more worthless than an insect, but Kamijou would likely have been struck by the girl’s magic had Stiyl not attacked. Kamijou might have been turned to ash had that happened.

“Touma!!”

When he heard Index’s voice as she frantically ran up, Kamijou finally felt his senses return to normal.

“We need to hurry, Index. The accuracy of the explosions is still increasing. If she gets away, we’re done for!”

As Kamijou brought his hands to the ground to climb to his feet, he felt something under his palm.

He looked down and found a plastic device between his palm and the ground. It was the data terminal from before.

(Since she didn't bother to retrieve it, she might be able to reset it remotely. I need to get any information I can from it now!!)

With that thought, Kamijou pressed the power switch. But he could get no further because a password screen appeared.

However…

A photo appeared behind the password screen as the device's background image. Kamijou froze in place when he saw it.

A bad feeling spread across his entire body.

He felt like he had made some great misunderstanding.

He had no real proof and it was nothing more than his own personal conjecture, but Index seemed to agree when she glanced at the small screen.

"Touma, what you are thinking is probably right. For one thing, I can think of nothing this magician could gain by leaving the group and acting on her own. And the Hindi written on the photo means…"

As Index explained in a quiet voice, the device's screen suddenly went black. A pie chart appeared in the center of the screen which filled up as the device seemed to complete some task. It would not stop no matter what button Kamijou pressed. Once the pie chart was fully filled with the color red, all light disappeared from the small screen. Not even pressing the power switch did anything now.

(So the data was wiped out remotely.)

Kamijou clicked his tongue and tossed aside the data terminal that was now a useless hunk of plastic.

Index said, "The center of Agni's Festival Fire was moved elsewhere because you destroyed the one in that building's ventilation fan, but that magician was not using it. She is causing those smaller-scale explosions using the terminals set up on those 'turbines', but it seems she hastily put this together. Otherwise, it seems a poor move on her part to only use a single portion of Agni's Festival Fire when it is powerful enough to roast the entire city."

"The Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens is the name of a magic cabal, right? Nothing says she's the only one of them inside Academy City. There might be others."

“And if those others have control of the center of Agni’s Festival Fire…”

“Then she’s just a decoy?”

As soon as Kamijou said that, his expression grew bitter.

Index nodded and said, “If the main force of the cabal continues on while we chase her around, they will have complete control over Agni’s Festival Fire. If that happens, entire blocks all over of the city could be roasted!!”

“But…” Kamijou hesitated. “Would a decoy really go this far? That magician is almost guaranteed to be captured and she could even end up roasted by the main force’s plan!”

“I do not know the details of the situation, but that is how it seems to have ended up,” said Index. “It is hard for even me to analyze because the structure is related those ‘electromagnetic wave’ things, but Agni’s Festival Fire is not something just anyone can control. By forcibly interfering with it the way she is, that magician has to be feeling pain like there is fire running through her nerves. …And yet she is putting up with it. She must be thinking about this in some way that makes this the best option.”

To protect Academy City from a great disaster, they had to search out the main force of the magic cabal.

But Kamijou and Index had no hint regarding the location of the main force of the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens. Their only option was to capture the decoy girl alive and have her talk.

In other words…

“Not good. If Stiyl doesn’t realize what is going on, he might try to finish this by killing the decoy girl!!”

“Not just that, Touma. Either the magician will be killed by the Anglican Church or she will use Agni’s Festival Fire too much and destroy herself. Those are the only two options. Either way, she will die without telling us anything. The magic cabal intentionally set the situation up that way to ensure their advantage!!”

“God damn all of these people,” groaned Kamijou. His voice then grew to a shout. “How can they choose to die or kill so easily!? The reason doesn’t matter. It’s wrong no matter what reason you have! We can think about what to do next after we save everyone, Index!!”

What Kamijou had seen on that data terminal had not been something complicated and technical. Nor had it been something only someone with magical knowledge would know how to use.

It had been a simple photograph one could find anywhere.

It had been nothing more than a photograph of that girl smiling along with another woman.

According to Index, the words written on it had meant the following:

So that we have the strength to protect each other.

Part 7

Kamijou and Index belatedly began chasing after the magician girl just as Stiyl was.

Explosions were still intermittently occurring around them. It was unclear how the girl was aiming, but the margin of error was clearly shrinking.

"A subway tunnel…?" muttered Kamijou when he saw where the girl had fled.

It was a single straight path, so it seemed ill suited to losing pursuers. There were also no crowds inside that the girl could try to lose herself within. She must have been too cornered to think about anything like that.

Or…

Perhaps she was intentionally creating an unfavorable situation to save her comrades by bringing about her own defeat.

"Let's hurry, Touma."

"Yeah."

They did not have any kind of light as they had not expected a situation like this, but they had to continue on regardless. Kamijou and Index set foot inside the tunnel that had a lukewarm wind flowing from it perhaps due to the large trains that ran through it.

They had no idea when a train would be coming, so they stayed as close to the wall as they could.

"This is basically a dead end. It's like she intentionally chose to run towards the edge of a cliff."

"I doubt the enemy magician would go very far in given the situation, but…"

But the situation changed in an instant.

That was because they spotted a figure further on in the darkness.

They recognized the person who was sitting down and leaning up against the wall.

“Stiyl!!” shouted Kamijou as he approached, but Stiyl only stirred slightly.

Kamijou could only see his silhouette in the darkness. He could not see the details, but it appeared the priest had been injured fairly badly.

“Stay…back.”

Kamijou assumed this was the priest’s usual rejection.

But it was not.

A small bursting sound as if from a small firework could be heard.

An explosion appeared right in front of Kamijou and Index as if creating a wall.

The explosion created a clean wall across the entire tunnel. The level of accuracy was clearly different from when the magician girl was unable to hit Kamijou before. It was obvious this was intended as a wall. It was a warning. The girl was telling them she could swallow them up in an explosion at any moment.

“Her accuracy shot way up all of a sudden!?”

“It’s the wind,” said Stiyl feebly.

He had lost to another flame user. That truth gave Kamijou an even stronger sense of danger.

“The countless terminals making up the network of Agni’s Festival Fire use a Shiva based communications method. Namely, wind. That magician is interfering with the terminals to acquire attack power at an individual level. That is why she must use the wind to acquire targeting information.”

“…”

“The flow of the wind is very inaccurate on the streets surrounded by a complex array of buildings. That is what introduced errors into her targeting. But in this single straight tunnel…”

“There is only one path for the wind, so the accuracy of her spell is on an entirely different level!!”

Kamijou had been thinking about it all wrong.

The enemy had not chosen the tunnel in order to escape.

An attacker was silently watching him from within the darkness.

Part 8

It had often been said that she was poor at grasping the trick to things.

When she constructed a spell, it was poorly optimized and had a lot of needless portions. The large number of pathways did not function as safety measures to prevent failure. Instead, the multiple signs and symbols would compete amongst each other and cause the spell to run out of control.

Even in the infiltration of Academy City, she had failed from the outset.

No matter how perfect it all seemed in theory, unplanned situations had a way of cropping up during the actual event. And because of something she had not taken into account, the spiritual item meant to obstruct the security from detecting her had failed to function. For the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens, she was the single person the enemies on the science side might have spotted.

But the very fact that she often failed was why she had never stood still after stumbling.

She contained the damage to its smallest possible level. By heading back in from a different angle, she could often gain something she could not have otherwise. She was used to making that kind of recovery. She would work as hard as she could towards success, but she would fail in the end. The situation would never progress ideally. It was because she understood that fact that the foundation of her thought process was in accomplishing something even when she tripped.

An assassin from the Anglican Church had arrived before they had finished setting up Agni’s Festival Fire.

If they had simply sat and watched, they would have been defeated before they knew it. The spiritual items for Agni’s Festival Fire would have been destroyed one after another and the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens’ plan would have been destroyed.

In that situation, the best card in their deck had been her.

It was specifically because they had quickly started to fail and be exposed that her role as a decoy had grown so important. Her value temporarily shot up when she could draw so many enemies away.

That was why she had chosen to do so of her own free will.

The higher ups of the cabal may have been holding their heads in their hands at her decision to head off on her own, but they would likely accept it in the end.

(This is fine.)

She thought silently in the subway tunnel.

(What matters most is profiting in the end. Any debt on the way does not matter. That is why I will give up everything here to create the opportunity for a great gain.)

Most likely, they would end up cornered in the long run even if she won the battle here. A flashy battle would cause an attack by the full force of Academy City's law enforcement. And even if they destroyed Academy City, more magic side assassins would come.

That was what it meant to have one's identity revealed.

Now that it was clear she could not escape unscathed, what did she need to do to gain the most? This was the stage where that sort of thought process was necessary.

She could not regroup with her comrades.

With no backup, she would be defeated eventually.

In that case, what was the best point to be defeated at?

She needed to protect her comrades.

She needed to protect her older sister.

If it was her best means of doing that, she would allow herself to be defeated without hesitation.

(The longer I keep them after me, the longer my sister and the others can move freely.)

Agni's Festival Fire was not originally something she could control.

However, she knew the enemy had interfered with the spell by adding their own magic circle on top of its spiritual item.

She learned from her mistakes.

She took advantage of any unplanned situations.

Ironically, the irregularity the enemy had hoped to defeat them with had actually given her power.

(If I am utterly defeated after I buy as much time as possible, any hint leading to my sister and the others will disappear. That will ultimately lead to our victory. It has to!!)

She was assuming her own defeat would come, but the best option for the moment was defeating the currently gathered enemies. She brought her focus to the Agni's Festival Fire she had interfered with.

She used the wind to aim.

In the complex structure of the city, the flow of the wind had been disorderly. That had thrown off her aim, but that was no longer an issue.

In the single, straight pathway of the tunnel, the flow was perfectly stable.

Her aim would be perfect.

Her biggest fear had been that her enemies would be too cautious to carelessly enter the tunnel. If the enemies sealed up all the entrances and injected some kind of gas or bacteria inside, there was nothing she could do.

But that risk had already been eliminated.

The enemies may have gained a false sense of security due to her poor aim before.

That had not been intentional.

But she would use that mistake to its fullest.

She knew very well that, no matter what happened on the way there, the last person standing would be the victor.

"You have no options left."

She had an accurate grasp of the enemies' locations.

A single shot would be enough to take down a flesh-and-blood human. And if that was not enough, she could fire again and again. She could create the same explosion every few seconds and she could accurately strike no matter where they might run. No matter what hidden skill the enemy had, they could not stand up to a string of accurate explosions.

“Whether you continue forward or fall back, you will be blown to pieces!!”

She did not hesitate.

As she muttered the spell under her breath, the explosion mercilessly attacked the enemy.

Part 9

The wind blowing through that single, straight tunnel would not be thrown out of order.

And if the magician girl used that stable wind to aim, Kamijou could not escape the flames of her Agni’s Festival Fire.

He doubted he could use Imagine Breaker in time against explosions that suddenly appeared out of thin air.

And Kamijou’s body was not reinforced magically or otherwise, so if even one of them struck him directly, there was a very real risk that he would be blown to pieces.

The situation was hopeless.

And on top of that, the enemy had no reason to hesitate.

An explosion roared within the tunnel.

That finishing blow came much too easily. Even with an overwhelming advantage, the enemy did not let down her guard. She did not allow her opponent even the slightest chance for a counterattack. This was the attack of an expert.

He should have died.

There was nothing those on Kamijou’s side could do. He should have simply been swallowed up by the explosion.

However…

“Wh-what?” uttered a girl whose face was made visible in the darkness thanks to the light of the flames she herself had produced.

Despite her supposedly perfect aim, the explosion of flames had missed.

Kamijou Touma still stood.

She once more used the Agni's Festival Fire she was interfering with. But this explosion did not hit either.

It was not that he was defending against it in some way.

The explosions of flame that should never have missed were appearing in the completely wrong place. Her basic assumption of perfect aim had fallen apart.

"What did you do…? There is no sign of any further intervention with my spell. But then there should be no error in the aiming…!!"

"I didn't do a thing to your spell. I wouldn't know how if I wanted to," said Kamijou with a small smile and a hand on the tunnel wall.

His unconcerned demeanor robbed all calmness from the girl's thoughts.

"Then why…!?"

"You'll know soon enough."

And he was right.

A change came over the flow of the dust thrown into the air by the explosions. It should have flowed stably along the path of the subway tunnel, but it did not. It was swirling around and a lot of it was being sucked up towards the walls near the ceiling.

"What…? You don't mean… Smoke vents in case of fire!?"

"This may be a tunnel, but it isn't a mine. Of course they take measures for emergencies."

Kamijou removed his hand from the wall.

The emergency button for the smoke vents appeared from under his hand.

"No matter how powerful an attack is, it's meaningless if the attack doesn't hit. I knew all too well from the previous attacks that the shockwave alone was not enough to blow me to pieces."

"Kh!!"

The girl sent an explosion not at Kamijou but at the wall nearby.

Kamijou immediately grasped what she was after, but he walked forward without rushing.

"It's no use. This is an emergency system in case of fire. It's made so the power line and cables can't be destroyed so easily."

His pace quickened from a walk to a run.

He charged forward.

The girl immediately tried to move backwards, but she quickly realized that was a foolish plan. A single, straight tunnel was ill suited for escape. With no obstacles, it would become a chase based purely on leg strength. And she could easily guess that Kamijou would be the faster of them due to his build.

She could not win with the cards in her hand.

The girl quickly came to that conclusion. She reached a hand around to her back and pulled a gold-colored blade from her blouse.

But Kamijou did not stop running.

He did not show any unneeded caution that would only give his opponent more time.

As he charged on, Kamijou said, "*I know what you're doing*."

"!?"

The girl's body stiffened and she tried to bring the blade to her own throat. Winning or losing here was a minor issue. What mattered to the girl was buying enough time for the main force to escape and to eliminate any hint leading to them.

As he was aware of that fact, Kamijou did not hesitate to speak.

"I know what you're doing. And I won't allow it. I won't!!"

The girl was actually able to stab the blade into her neck before Kamijou could stop her.

He was unable to stop her from sending the pointed tip digging into the skin.

But that was as far as it got.

In the next instant, Kamijou's right hand reached the gold weapon in the girl's hands. And the instant his extended fingertips touched it, the blade shattered. It was completely destroyed before it could make it any deeper than the skin.

Kamijou grabbed the girl's collar with both hands and slammed her back forcefully against the nearby wall.

"Will you admit defeat here or do I need to punch you first? It's your choice," said Kamijou as the girl struggled to breathe. "Whatever happens, you aren't getting a chance to end this by dying. Keep that in mind as you choose."

Part 10

Stiyl restrained the girl magically. He placed a few rune cards on her body which prevented her from refining magic power.

“She was likely a decoy meant to buy time,” said Kamijou when Stiyl had finished his work. “The main force of the magic cabal is elsewhere. What do we do now?”

“For now, we need to put together a plan to prevent her from escaping or being rescued by her comrades. …Of course, the simplest method would be to kill her here.”

“We can’t do that!”

“If you know of a reason why I need to listen to what you say, I would like to hear it.”

“I’m the one that won here. If it had just been you, you would have died. Do you have anything to say to that?”

Stiyl clicked his tongue.

And then he spoke disinterestedly.

“Then we need to lock her up in some random place. Since she is restrained, it does not have to be a specialized detention facility, but we cannot just let her go free. We also need to get information on the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens from her.”

“What if we report her to Anti-Skill?”

“That is the first place the cabal will think to look. If they learn of the girl’s capture, they might attack.”

“So as long as the cabal would not think to check there, it can be anywhere?”

“Any ideas?”

“My place.”

Stiyl let out a large sigh when he heard that.

“Well, if you’re willing to tell an enemy magician where you live, that’s fine by me. It might earn you an early grave, but that’s no concern of mine.”

“…”

Kamijou got the feeling he must have made a ridiculous suggestion, but he could think of no other possibilities.

While making sure not to touch her with his right hand, Kamijou grabbed the restrained girl with his left hand. He held up his other hand. He could see taxis driving along, but almost all of them were already full.

“I doubt remaining silent will help anymore. Then again, I don’t understand any of the technical stuff.” Kamijou spoke to the girl as he waited for a taxi. “There was a photo in your cell phone. …I don’t know who that was, but it’s someone important to you, right? I won’t say anything about that.”

“…”

The girl gave no response.

Finally, an empty taxi noticed them and drove up. The backdoor opened automatically, so Kamijou began to push the girl inside.

When he did, she muttered, “I wanted to protect my sister.” Her voice sounded feeble. “Was that so wrong?”

“There are plenty of ways to do that,” replied Kamijou. “At the very least, there are a lot more ways than you think there are that are better than this.”

“…”

The girl raised her head slightly.

She started to move her lips as if to say something.

But then…

A small unpleasant bursting noise could be heard.

“What…?”

It happened so suddenly, Kamijou did not have time to react.

An orange explosion occurred right next to the girl.

All the glass in the taxi shattered and one side was horribly dented in. Kamijou and the girl were both thrown to the ground. Due to the damage done to the car, its horn began blaring meaninglessly. The driver was yelling something, but Kamijou paid no attention to him.

Still on the ground, he yelled to Stiyl.

“What happened!? I thought you restrained her!!”

“The restraining effects are still active! She cannot refine magic power. There is no way she could have used the spell!!”

“Touma, it wasn’t her! Another magician tried to use Agni’s Festival Fire to silence her!!”

Kamijou felt a thick liquid on his palm.

A dark red stain could be seen there, but it had not come from him.

“Shit!!”

He frantically got up so he could check on the girl’s condition as she lay on the ground, but he was an amateur. All he could tell was that she had blood flowing from her head and that it was not simply a scratch.

The girl lay sprawled out on the ground with no strength in any of her limbs, but she still managed to speak.

“Good…”

A small smile appeared on her face.

She smiled despite having been betrayed by the allies who she had risked her life to protect.

“This will surely protect my sister… Good…”

“That isn’t true,” said Kamijou through clenched teeth. “I just said there are plenty of ways of doing that! Helping out with that ridiculous plan is not the only way to protect her!! Why can’t you tell that the best way to save someone is to have them leave that world of kill or be killed!?”

Despite Kamijou shouting in anger so nearby, the girl’s reaction was dull.

Kamijou was not even sure if his words were reaching her.

He slammed his fist against the ground and pulled out his cell phone. He was of course going to call an ambulance, but then Stiyl spoke up.

“You are free to do whatever you like, but they will likely send an assassin if they determine they failed to finish her off. To be blunt, any attempt to save her will likely be useless.”

“That just means you need to capture that assassin or whoever they send. You can view this as a trap with her as a hostage if you wish! In the meantime, I’m going to focus on saving her life!!”

As he waited for the phone to ring on the other end, Kamijou looked down on the girl collapsed on the ground.

He looked at the wound on her head, grimaced, and spat out some words.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. How can this result be ‘good’?”

CHAPTER 3

Part 1

After being taken the hospital, the magician girl was given first aid.

Naturally, they hid the fact that she was a magician. The doctors would not have understood if they had tried to explain and it would have caused problems if they did understand, so there was no point in mentioning it.

Kamijou and Index rode along in the ambulance while Stiyl pursued the main force of the magic cabal. That girl had merely been a decoy meant to buy time, so they did not have any time to spare if the main force was working to gain control of the center of Agni's Festival Fire.

Kamijou spoke to Index in the waiting room.

"They say her condition is not as bad as it looked at first glance. She suffered light blood loss and a concussion. If she rests, she should be back to normal in a few hours."

"Touma, what do we do now?"

"We don't have time," he said quickly. "When a patient with injuries that appear to be from some sort of incident comes in, the hospital will contact Anti-Skill. They should be here before long. We need to speak with her before that happens."

They headed for the girl's hospital room.

The magician girl had been provided with a private room. She lay on the single bed in the room and she was not wearing a hospital gown. It may have been that her treatment had not required her clothes to be cut away or it may have been that Stiyl's restraining runes had prevented the clothes from being removed.

When Kamijou and Index entered, the girl glanced over and spoke with an emotionless voice.

"What do you want?"

“We’re going to get you out of here.” Kamijou cut to the chase. “The hospital will have called Anti-Skill, so they should be here soon. But Stiyl does not want you to be captured by them. He said the odds are good your magic cabal would notice. I don’t want to think about the possibility, but is there a chance you will be attacked again if we hand you over to them?”

“What if there is?” The girl tried to sit up but then sank back into the bed. “That is what I hope happens. They failed to kill me before, but they will succeed next time. That is all there is to it. At the very least, it is a hundred times better than handing more information than necessary over to Academy City or the Anglican Church.”

“I see.”

Suddenly, they heard multiple sets of footsteps in the hallway.

“Touma!”

“Tch, so Anti-Skill’s already here. We can talk later. We can’t use the hallway, so we’ll use the window.”

“Hey, wait a second. What are you doing!?”

“We’re getting you out of here!”

The magician girl frowned.

“I never said I would go.”

“Sorry, but you have no say in the matter. I’ll carry you if need be.”

Kamijou approached the window and opened it. He looked down to find a height of about three stories. The eaves stuck out and the drain pipes for gutters continued vertically down, so there were plenty of points for handholds and footholds.

“Let’s go. They said you had no broken bones, so you can use your arms and legs, right?”

“You can shelter me if you like, but don’t your city’s rules put you at a disadvantage here?”

“Even if they do, it’s no reason to abandon you.”

“Even if I am refusing your help? You gain nothing from this.”

“That’s no reason either,” replied Kamijou as he checked to make sure there was no one on the ground directly below. “It was the same when you tried to save your sister, right? No one forced it onto you.”

The girl clicked her tongue.

With her head hanging down, she said, “You said the cabal might attack me if you leave me with this city’s Anti-Skill.”

“Y-yeah. What about it?”

“In that case, you could have threatened to hand me over to them if I did not cooperate. You could have said I had to tell you everything I knew about the cabal or you would not let me escape. Why didn’t you?”

Kamijou’s response was simple.

“The thought never occurred to me.”

“…You idiot.” As soon as she muttered that, the girl brought her feet out of the bed and to the ground. “It’s Sozty.”

“What?”

“My name is Sozty Exica. What’s yours?”

Kamijou smiled slightly.

“Kamijou Touma. And she’s Index.”

♦

By the time Anti-Skill entered the room, no one was left inside.

They immediately began a search, but never found anyone.

Part 2

Cities had plenty of blind spots.

But people unfamiliar with the science side and Academy City were often unable to make full use of such spots. Such people tended to gather at the types of facilities that also existed outside of Academy City.

In this case, it was a car scrapyard.

That modern blind spot was completely surrounded by thick metal walls. It was the kind of place that could be found anywhere yet the people who walked by it had no idea what went on within. Even if humans were being chopped to pieces within, no one would know.

A large number of rusted vehicle chassis were piled up. A pile had been created out of nothing but tires. Bumpers and batteries were sectioned off in their own areas. The area gave a strong cluttered impression, but the people that used it kept it fairly organized.

The Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens.

A Hindu magic cabal.

About twenty members of that cabal were gathered in the scrapyard. The only member missing was Sozty Exica.

“Sozty did it. The time she bought us was very valuable. If we take control of the center to Agni’s Festival Fire that we transferred here, we can turn this city into a sea of flames with our Anglican pursuer inside.”

“But Sozty interfered with Agni’s Festival Fire to buy this time. It is possible the network has been damaged.”

“If we take a passive stance here, this valuable time will go to waste.”

“But making any major moves without any guarantee of success could lead to a fatal failure.”

They were aware this unproductive discussion was accomplishing nothing more than strangling their own throats. And yet they could not help but do it. No matter how much one knew prayer would not change the result, no one would be able to easily pull the trigger in a game of Russian roulette.

A woman within the group sighed.

She had long silver hair and brown skin. The fact that everyone turned their focus to her showed that she had the composure left to intentionally gather their attention.

Someone in the group spoke to her.

“Should we continue on or fall back? What do you say?”

“Good question.” A thin smile appeared on her lips before she continued. “How about this?”

Part 3

“Hey…um, Kamijou did you say your name was? How far are you planning to have us walk?”

“As far as it takes to ensure your safety. Sozty, tell me if this is too much after your injuries.”

After escaping the hospital, Kamijou and the others headed to a nearby shopping district. Academy City had security cameras everywhere and security robots patrolled several routes, so it had few blind spots. Trying to sneak along a route no one would see them on would get them caught faster than mixing in with a crowd.

As Kamijou continued on in the lead, he felt like groaning when he looked back and saw Sozty’s outfit.

“Why do magicians always wear clothes that stand out as much as a Christmas tree?”

“Is this that odd? Well, I guess this is a special city surrounded by walls in an island nation surrounded by ocean. I suppose you would be harsh on outsiders.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

Sozty was wearing a white short-sleeve sailor uniform with a blue pleated skirt. That alone would not have been too strange an outfit, but both the top and bottom were very short. Her healthy brown belly was visible even when she was not stretching out her back and Kamijou felt like her ass would be visible below the skirt if he circled around behind her.

“What is that? A cheerleader outfit? What is it supposed to be???”

“This is a strange city where 80% of the residents are students, right? And I had heard that Japanese schoolgirls dressed like sailors. I thought this would make good camouflage.”

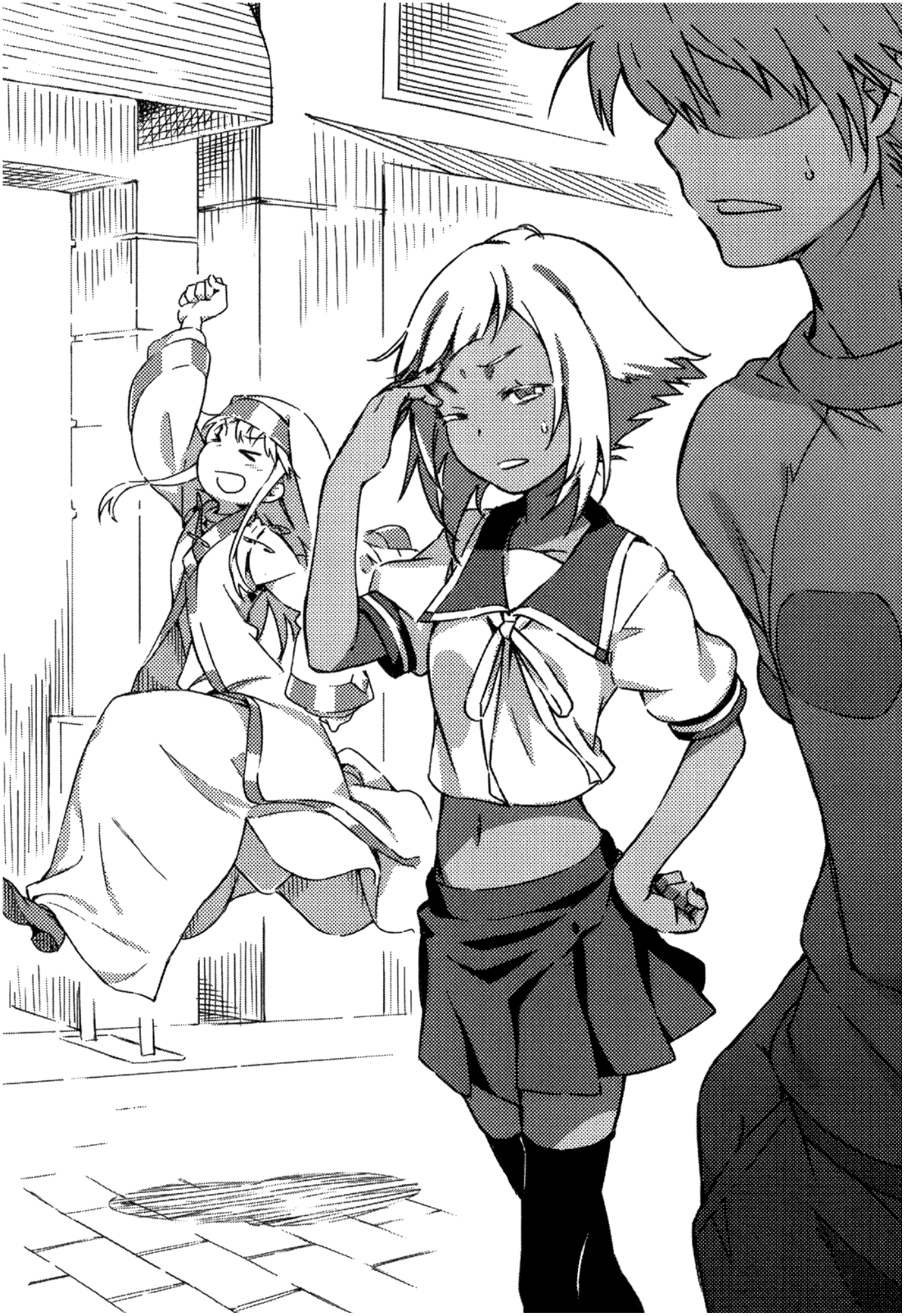
“…And why are your panties more or less visible at all times?”

“That’s just how it is with Japanese schoolgirls, right?”

That answer left Kamijou very curious as to what she had used as a reference for Japanese culture. He decided he should probably be thankful she had not showed up dressed as some kind of strange Fujiyama Geisha lady.

Meanwhile, another member of their group also stood out quite a bit.

The pure white nun named Index said, “Touma, what are we going to do now?”



“If we could, I would like to head to my dorm, but I’m not sure we can. It might be safer to hide out in a manga café.”

“What’s a manga café?”

“To sum it up as much as possible, it’s something like a for-pay library.”

“What!? That’s crazy! Those are supposed to be public!!”

“But you can order things like coffee and curry. Some of them even have a salad bar and buffet. In other words, it’s all you can eat.”

“Yahoo!! This is a new golden age of business, isn’t it, Touma!?”

Index’s opinions changed a lot as her primary information source was talk shows. Sozty brought a hand to her head when she saw the nun celebrating.

“Have you forgotten we’re supposed to be on the run? Why are you needlessly gathering attention?”

“It’s probably fine. A group with gloomy expressions remaining silent the entire time will stand out a lot more in the crowds of a shopping district.”

“…Is that so?” muttered Sozty.

Kamijou looked around at the signs, searching for a restaurant that would let them pay up front. That way they would not be treated as dine-and-ditchers if Anti-Skill or someone showed up and they had to run out the back entrance.

“Hmm… A main road near the station is probably the best spot. That way, taxis, a bus stop, and the subway are all nearby. Hey, Inde-…hm?”

Kamijou trailed off because Sozty’s small hand had tugged on his clothes.

“What is it, Sozty? Did you see a magician you know or something?” he asked, but the brown girl did not let go of his clothes.

“No…There is no deep meaning to this.”

“?”

“You said we could not look gloomy and remain silent the entire time, right? Then this will work as camouflage.”

“Hey, wait a second. This isn’t to blend into the area, is it? You’re just getting drawn in by the glittering atmosphere of the shopping district, aren’t-…gwep!?”

As Kamijou the gentleman tried to calmly point out what was happening, he felt a sharp pain in his back. It was similar to the damage done when a carnivorous jaguar used its claws to climb a tree. He could not turn around to see what was doing this because it was clinging to his back, but Kamijou could make a good guess based on what he heard.

Despite being shorter than him, he heard Index's voice coming from overhead.

She was clearly climbing up his back.

"Touma, what is this you're taking advantage of this situation to do?"

"Wait a second, Index! Let's start by working out what the focus of this conversation is!! And I think someone getting bitten on the back of the head would stand out anywhere on the planet!!"

Just before Kamijou underwent severe damage, a simple electronic tone sounded from his pants pocket. It was the prepaid cell phone Stiyl had given him. Index was terrible with machines, so she faltered slightly at the noise. Kamijou did not overlook that opening. He shook her from his back and answered the phone.

"Stiyl!? Honestly, you only call when it benefits you. Don't leave your number unlisted! I can't save it to call you back!!"

"I would say you are the one acting out of line."

The voice coming from the phone sounded angry.

For him, relying on Kamijou's opinions and information was likely a last resort.

"You took the girl from the cabal out of the hospital, didn't you? I need some information from her. It relates to the opinions and motives of the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens."

"What? I thought you were chasing them down." Kamijou looked confused. "And do you not need to know about their escape routes or hideouts?"

"I am not an idiot. I have already found and entered the car scrapyard the cabal was using."

Kamijou heard some static.

Stiyl may have been sighing or blowing out some cigarette smoke.

"But…"

"?"

“They were already destroyed when I got there. From the number of footprints, it appears a few of them disappeared, but the ones still here are unrecoverable. All of the information within their bodies has been magically destroyed, so I cannot extract any from their brains or spirits. Any analysis work would likely be a waste.”

“Un…recoverable…?” muttered Kamijou.

Sozty gave a stare next to him.

Stiyl’s merciless words continued.

“From the traces of the destruction, I doubt this was an attack from outside. In other words, this was infighting within the organization. That is why I want information from another magician in the cabal. I need to know what exactly is happening in their cabal.”

Part 4

Kipsila Endinia gasped for breath as he ran through an area lined with student dorms. A slight bit of blood oozed from his temple and his right arm was hanging unnaturally limply from the shoulder. Night had already fallen, but an area with restaurants targeted at students must have been nearby because quite a few people were out on the road. He naturally drew a lot of attention. But he was in no situation to worry about that.

“D-damn her…!!”

His feet stumbled as if he was on a ship in a storm. Time after time, he ran into a concrete wall or wind turbine. Even so, he continued to run. He continued to flee. He had no idea how far we would need to run to be safe.

It had happened in an instant.

Even taking into account it had been a surprise attack by an ally, the amount of damage had been too great. Control of the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens was completely held by Kipsila and a few others. Even if someone on the “outer edges” had gone on a rampage, the damage would never have reached Kipsila. The others would have acted as shields to lessen the damage. And during that time, Kipsila and the others would have carried out a certain counterattack. That was the power of an organization. That was what should have happened.

But…

In actuality…

“What…? What kind of output was that!?”

It had pierced straight through those acting as shields. The attack had directly reached Kipsila and the other. That had stopped any preparations for a counterattack and then subsequent strikes had wiped them out. Once it started to crumble, an organization was nothing but a hindrance. The members of the magic cabal unit had started to fall one after another, yet the enemy continued to attack without mercy.

The level of power was unthinkable for an individual.

The output completely ignored the intentionally limited values that had been put in place to prevent both rebellion and friendly fire.

Plus, the woman who had become their enemy had supposedly been a failure. The project behind the power that had made her special had long since been frozen.

And yet…

“Gah…!?”

He ran into another wind turbine pillar. He had lost track of how many times that had happened now. But this time it stopped him. He could not continue his flight. As he leaned up against the pillar that was sticky with his blood, Kipsila breathed a sigh.

It was not due to strength leaving his legs that he could not continue on.

Someone stood ahead on the road dimly lit by the sparsely placed streetlights.

It was a woman.

She had long silver hair and brown skin.

She wore a tube top and a long skirt that were primarily yellow and orange but had black accents here and there. The combination was reminiscent of the silhouette of a strapless dress.

She was dragging something with both hands.

They looked like stuffed toys at first, but they were not.

She had two in her right hand and three in her left. Kipsila recognized the faces of the people she was dragging along the road by the collar. They were the ones who had controlled the cabal along with him.

How had this horrible situation happened?

They had been faced with a bit of trouble, but the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens had maintained control of the situation. They should have been able to use the time Sozty Exica had bought as a decoy to make a recovery.

“What…?” groaned Kipsila.

Whether she intended to answer or not, the silver-haired, brown-skinned woman relaxed her right and left hands. With a thudding sound similar to a sandbag being dropped, she dropped her hunter’s prize to the road surface.

Something other than his injuries caused Kipsila to feel dizzy.

“You lost everything in that failure! The project was frozen!! So how can you wield such great power!?”

“…Oh? All I did was answer your question.”

“What?”

“Question 1: what is the most effective means of damaging Academy City with the strength we currently have?” said the brown woman with a thin smile. “The answer is simple: we give up on Agni’s Festival Fire.”

“Wha-…?”

“After all, we’ve given away way too many hints about this ill-prepared plan. Both the Anglican Church and Academy City are already pursuing us. It is like a boat made of mud. If we try to force it along any further, we will all sink.” The brown woman continued while grinning. She announced that she would destroy the dying Kipsila. “But that boat of mud is the only thing our pursuers have managed to grasp. If I cast aside both Agni’s Festival Fire and the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens and start with a new plan, I can polish my plan while the pursuers chew on the half-eaten leftovers. And it will be too late by the time they learn the truth.”

“You…fool. What could you possibly use…to produce more destruction than…Agni’s Festival-…!?”

Kipsila trailed off.

This was because the brown woman was slowly opening and closing her bloody fingers.

“Don’t tell me you…”

“If I had said I was going to use this from the beginning, you would not have given me permission. In fact, you would probably have tried to gang up and attack me all at once.”

“You should know better than anyone why that project was frozen. It was not because the needed output could not be achieved! It was the exact opposite!! That pure Astra is-…!!”

“I can tell it scares you.” The woman tilted her head slightly. “But surely you don’t think the Astra I hold is still the same as it was back then.”

“…!!”

That meant Agni’s Festival Fire had been a decoy meant to draw the attention of the Anglicans and Academy City.

That meant Kipsila and the others who had ridiculed Sozty Exica for being a decoy had been decoys themselves.

That meant the plan Kipsila had been aware of was merely a decoy to get the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens to take action.

That meant the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens had been nothing more than a decoy to ensure her freedom.

That meant, that meant, that meant!!

“Well, anyway…”

The brown woman took a step closer.

Kipsila instinctually tried to take a step back, but then he realized something. He had been drawing so much attention not long before, but he could no longer feel anyone’s eyes on him. In fact, there was not a single person around.

Magic ensuring that had been set up without him even noticing.

And that meant the woman was going to do something she did not want to be witnessed.

The magic circle for Agni’s Festival Fire was set up on the bloody wind turbine pillar. But Kipsila did not even think about using it.

Those bloody fingers.

Her smile.

Overwhelming fear slowly closed in on him.

“Could you be a good decoy and leave now that your role is complete?”

Part 5

Kamijou and the others ended up entering a manga café. They paid for three private rooms (using Kamijou's pocket money), but they all met up in one of them.

Stiyl had sent a large amount of image data to the prepaid phone.

They were all photographs of the faces of the magic cabal members who had been defeated and left behind by the mystery attacker.

As Sozty Exica checked through them all, she asked, "Is this all of them?"

"Looks like it. Have you figured anything out?"

"…There aren't enough people," she said after looking through the photos multiple times to be sure. "Aurodasa Ginzhana, Kereelty Tanabrook, Sumtalak Shandeva, Kipsila Endinia, Pancavani Uddasala, and Slasoma Anruda. …Well, I can understand why those six are missing. They were the decision-makers of the cabal. If someone attacked, the rest of the cabal would position themselves to let them escape first."

"Is that it?"

"Seven people are missing in total," muttered Sozty Exica. She spoke a new name through gritted teeth. "Ureapaddy Exica. My older sister. There is no real reason she would be protected above anyone else. If the other magicians were wiped out to let those six escape, my sister should have been wiped out as well."

Kamijou looked at Sozty's face from the side.

She stared at the small screen rather than looking at him as she continued to speak.

"And…these wounds. They are very similar to those caused by the Astras our cabal uses."

"Astras?" repeated Kamijou in confusion.

Index replied, "Those are the weapons of the gods in Hindu mythology."

"It differs a bit from the original meaning, but our cabal uses the term Astra to refer to all powers and weapons that use symbols of the gods' characteristics," said Sozty in a low voice "We refer to what I used against you as the Agni Astra. However, they have to be downsized quite a bit for humans to wield them. The Astras we use are nothing but the effects. Take a spear Astra for example. We can create stab wounds with it, but we cannot produce the form of the spear itself."

That meant the term Astra could refer to many different things. It would not be mistaken to assume there were different Astras for each element that had been prepared by the gods: fire, water, wind, and earth

In that case…

What was the element of the Astra that Ureapaddy had secretly brought in and used to drive the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens to destruction?

“My sister is supposed to be using a Shiva Astra, but she originally specialized in a different line of Astra.”

“?”

“The project was supposedly frozen. It was not a downsized version that a magician could safely use with no recoil. This was a pure Astra that was built up into the proper form of a weapon rather than simply creating the stab wound. The project was meant to draw out the full power of an Astra despite the great burden that would produce.” Sozty clenched her teeth and seemed to be forcing out the words. “In the end, the Astra itself was a success, but it still failed because the reinforcement of the magicians using it did not go well. Most of the participants were blown to pieces by the recoil and my sister was badly wounded. It had supposedly messed with her physical body too much to have any proper defenses left!!”

“What…? What kind of Astra does your sister have?”

“The Astra held by my sister Ureapaddy Exica is…”

Part 6

The silver-haired and brown-skinned woman named Ureapaddy smiled.

She wiped dark red blood off on the road surface as her former superior, Kipsila Endinia, lay collapsed face down not far away.

Kipsila’s eyes were no longer turned toward her.

His head was tilted at an odd angle and unmoving.

And yet his lips twitched.

“Is this revenge for reorganizing your Astra…? Is this for the fourteen who were destroyed…?”

“Of course not, of course not. Their deaths were officially said to be an accident, but we all agreed to it. We gathered the people with the greatest affinity to the Astra, those fifteen had their spirits unified, and then that ‘average’ was redistributed back into the bodies of the fifteen. Right?”

A calm smile appeared on Ureapaddy’s face.

Her expression changed peacefully, gently, politely, and accurately.

“But the reinjection of the unified spirit had little success. Just like with the heart and the liver, the physical structure of the brain differs from person to person. The spirit attaches to not just the brain but the entire body. If a spirit injected from without does not meet the requirements, it will fall apart. And there is no way one can control that Astra in that unstable state. But those failures were our failures. It would be wrong to hate the cabal for that.”

“Then…”

“It is quite simple.”

Ureapaddy’s smile did not disappear.

The smile was too perfect, so anyone who saw it would likely find it artificial and unnatural.

“Even if only incompletely, I can use that Astra. But only if I ignore any damage done to myself and others. If I have a tool I can use, why not use it? I have a weapon with greater effects than Agni’s Festival Fire, so it only makes sense to attack Academy City with it. Even if that means I must use Agni’s Festival Fire as a stepping stone.”

“…Are you really going to use that?”

“I already have. That is why you have been defeated. Just like all the others. Isn’t it a bit late to be surprised?”

“I am not talking about on a level where you can carry it around with you! I am asking if you are going to use that Astra at the output levels from when the project was frozen!! If…if you do that…!!”

“The effects will spread beyond Academy City?”

Ureapaddy guessed what he was going to say and denied it.

But not by saying his ultimate conclusion was wrong.

It was an earlier assumption that had been wrong.

“It is because you say that kind of thing that your cabal remains so insignificant. You think I would simply continue with a plan that was crushed five years ago? Have you forgotten that my skills have advanced along with time? At the moment…” She uttered a concrete numerical value without showing any real sign of making any calculations. “I can probably draw out an output 509,000 times that of the attack you were desperate to accomplish back then.”

Kipsila’s breathing completely stopped for a moment.

In all seriousness, he underwent such a great shock that he seemed to lack even the level of thought required to continue breathing.

“You will destroy us all.”

“Perhaps.”

“If that value is accurate, there will be no safe area left on this planet! Whether one flees to highest heights of the atmosphere or the deepest depths of the ocean, that will evaporate it all!! Who knows if the planet itself would be able to continue properly in its orbit!!”

“But isn’t that just the kind of Astra I have? After all…”

Ureapaddy paused for a beat.

And then…

Part 7

Somewhere, the younger sister spoke.

“It is the ultimate weapon within the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens.”

Somewhere, the older sister spoke.

“A weapon that symbolizes the god who rules the universe needs to at least be able to destroy the universe.”

Miraculously, their mouths seemed to move as one as they spoke its name.

“The Brahma Astra.”

Part 8

Stiyl called Kamijou's prepaid cell phone. As usual, he kept his number hidden, but he must have been expecting some kind of information to call back so quickly.

Kamijou stepped outside, leaving Index and Sozty Exica in the manga café.

He reported that it had most likely been a magician named Ureapaddy Exica that had destroyed the cabal. He also reported that the magician had a large-scale spiritual item called Brahma Astra.

"I see," replied Stiyl. "I had thought it was odd for the Agni's Festival Fire magic circles around Academy City to suddenly stop functioning. This Ureapaddy must have cut it off like a lizard's tail. And she has something powerful enough for casting aside Agni's Festival Fire to be worthwhile."

"That's this Brahma Astra that Sozty mentioned, right?"

"You said Ureapaddy currently uses a Shiva-related Astra, correct? Shiva is the god of wind, dance, war, and destruction. He has many different faces. And all of those could be said to be attributes of Shiva. A god with many different attributes could easily have many different Astras."

"And Brahma Astra is one of those?"

"That is not a Shiva-related Astra. It is related to the god Brahma. Having the one Brahma-related Astra that does not fit in with the Shiva ones must mean it has some special meaning." Stiyl spoke languidly over the phone. "In their mythology, I think it is supposed to be a special bow and arrow. The magic arrow has feathers of wind and an arrowhead of the sun. Once it is fired, it will be automatically guided to its target. It will pierce through any obstacles in the way and surely kill the target. Once the target is dead, it will return to its owner like a boomerang so that the enemy cannot capture it. It's full of the type of abilities that feel like cheating that we've gotten so used to."

Was it a person or a location?

It was unclear who or what Ureapaddy was trying to target, but if it actually existed, it would have no means of opposing the attack.

"It seems the project was treated as highly secret even within the cabal, so Sozty does not know the details. However, she does know the usage conditions for Brahma Astra are heavily related to shooting stars. It can only be used when three shooting stars are glittering in the sky at once."

“It likely needs them to correct its aim. The god Brahma has a deep connection to outer space. It must act like a GPS and accurately calculate out the target’s coordinates from the shooting stars’ positions high in the atmosphere. …Wait a second.” Stiyl paused for a moment. “I just received a report from the Anglican unit working in India. It isn’t the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens’ headquarters, but they did find the remains of a large scale magical experimental grounds.”

“Did they find anything related to Brahma Astra?”

“Possibly. They have found a crater with a radius of about fifty meters. But the composition of the crater’s surface is simply crazy. For exactly three millimeters down, the ground has been crystallized.”

“…?”

“This was no normal explosion. It is unclear what effects it had, but it seems absolutely everything within range was torn away to form the crater.”

If that was true, this was no joking matter.

Compared to Agni’s Festival Fire which could roast an entire city, the level of destructive power did not seem that great. However, it depended on what the target was. If that destruction with an exactly fifty meter radius was used on the solid outer walls of an Academy City research facility, the magician could get inside.

“There appear to be a few different explosion sites, including one over five hundred meters underground. The ground has been scooped out in a perfect sphere down there.”

“…What do you mean?”

“It appears to be able to pass through any obstacle and cause tremendous destruction only upon reaching its target. In other words, hiding in a shelter is useless.”

Of course, the magician did not even need to bother attacking Academy City’s research facilities. If she directly tried to kill the highest ranking officials of the city, no amount of security would help. As soon as she fired Brahma Astra, it would all be over.

Stiyl seemed to be making an effort to keep his voice calm.

“But the one bottleneck is its requirement of three simultaneous shooting stars. Brahma Astra’s range and accuracy may be unknown, but thankfully its usage conditions are quite restrictive. Shooting stars do not appear very frequently. Seeing three in the night sky at once must almost never happen. As long as some crazy coincidence doesn’t trip us up, we should be able to resolve this without much-…”

“…No, wait.”

Kamijou cut Stiyl off because something caught in the back of his mind.

There was something they could not stand to overlook.

“Whatever Ureapaddy’s ultimate objective is, it probably has to do with Brahma Astra. But no matter how much she could predict, would she really leave it all up to something coincidental like shooting stars?”

“It is possible she is simply overly confident in her own predictions. …But if Ureapaddy was planning to betray her comrades from the beginning, it does seem odd she would rely on a natural phenomenon that would ruin her plans if it was even slightly off.”

“She might have created an environment where such coincidences would occur more easily.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“What exactly is a shooting star? In the days before humanity had reached beyond the earth, the only option may have been chunks of ore about the size of your palm that came flying from a distant part of space. But things are different today. There is so much orbital debris cluttering things up that most shooting stars are the glow of broken satellites or rocket parts entering the atmosphere! What if those qualify for Brahma Astra’s usage requirements!?”

And the ideal international event for that was currently underway.

A contest for unmanned probes being sent to Venus.

Around four hundred organizations and institutions both large and small were taking part in the event, so rockets were being launched from all over the world.

The odds of shooting stars would naturally go up just from the many unneeded parts that separate after launch. For these few days, the frequency of shooting stars would rise dramatically.

While Brahma Astra would normally only be usable once every few decades or once every few hundred years, it might be usable in relatively quick succession now.

“But that is still a bit uncertain,” said Stiyl after Kamijou explained the situation to him. “That is only a beginning. Ureapaddy would not rely on a coincidence when aiming for her true target. She likely has some trick prepared in case the coincidence does not play out.”

“Such as?”

“She could have set something up on a rocket that has yet to be launched. If she detonates the rocket in space, she can create shooting stars according to whatever schedule she likes.”

Kamijou did not know what the enemy was trying to accomplish.

For that reason, he could not head there ahead of time and wait with Imagine Breaker at the ready.

And once Brahma Astra was fired, the target would be destroyed with incredibly high odds.

“Once it has been fired, it is too late,” said Stiyl.

“But Ureapaddy will need to stop by the rocket launch facility before beginning her attack. She needs to prepare her insurance.”

“This is our final chance. If we cannot stop Ureapaddy here, destructive power worthy of the name of the god of destruction will sweep across Academy City.”

Academy City had only one rocket launch facility.

“District 23. That is where Ureapaddy will be headed!!”

Part 9

Kamijou, Index, Sozty, and Stiyl gathered in District 18. That district was adjacent to District 23.

Out of necessity, Kamijou was acting as their guide to the city.

“District 23 is filled with top secret information, so you cannot freely go in and out like the rest of the city. Plus, the gates will simply be impassable at this time of night.”

“In other words, we should assume we will be mowed down the instant we cross that fence?” asked Sozty in annoyance.

Index frowned and said, “But if what Touma said is accurate, Ureapaddy is heading for District 23, right?”

“It would be best to intercept her before she gets inside,” said Kamijou confidently, but Stiyl dashed his hopes.

“She has no reason to wait around. Up until now, she had to feign cooperation with the rest of the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens, so she put it off until later. But with that restriction gone, she would have headed directly for District 23. We should assume she is already inside.”

“…I’m not so sure,” muttered Sozty.

The others turned toward her.

As her sister, Sozty would have the most accurate information on Ureapaddy.

“District 23 was a high priority target even in the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens’ initial plan. And yet Agni’s Festival Fire was never set up there. The reason for that was simple: our cabal had no way of getting inside unnoticed.”

“What…?”

Stiyl frowned.

Sozty stared at the fellow magician.

“We could get in, but only for about ten minutes. Any longer than that would mean a direct conflict with Academy City’s defensive forces. That was simply not enough time to fine-tune and set up such a delicate spiritual item. Our plan was to destroy a few prominent districts with Agni’s Festival Fire, use the confusion to directly attack District 23, and escape Academy City after destroying the facilities there.”

Even if the plan had failed, hearing it still sent a chill down Kamijou’s spine.

But another point stood out to him.

However, it seemed like it would digress too much from the topic at hand, so he decided to put it off until later.

Instead he asked, “So does that mean Ureapaddy has not entered District 23?”

“If she had headed there immediately after destroying our cabal, the alarms would have long since started ringing. Assuming she has no other tricks up her sleeve, of course.”

After hearing that last ominous statement by Sozty, Stiyl lightly tapped his shoes on the ground.

“If our assumptions are correct, Ureapaddy plans to sabotage a rocket to be launched at a specific time so that she can detonate it outside of the atmosphere and artificially create the shooting stars she needs for Brahma Astra. I doubt that is something she can accomplish in only ten minutes. It is harder to sabotage than it is to simply destroy.”

They were overlooking something.

If Ureapaddy had foreseen this situation from the beginning, she would have known it was impossible to infiltrate District 23 for long using the magic she had on hand. In that case, she would have prepared some sort of countermeasure.

They were missing some factor involved.

Did she have a means of sabotaging the rocket in a short period of time?

Did she have a spell that allowed her to slip past the defenses of District 23 for a long period of time?

"…Wait," muttered Kamijou. "That's it. That's it! It's simple. She just needs a way of sabotaging a rocket without entering District 23!!"

"Touma, what do you mean? Are you saying she has something similar to a curse that can be used across national borders? Something that can alter this 'rocket' thing remotely?"

"No. If she had something that convenient, she wouldn't have needed to enter Academy City at all."

"Then what is it?" asked Sozty in confusion.

Kamijou's response was simple.

"We were thinking about this backwards."

"?"

"Sozty isn't doing something to District 23 from outside. If the target rocket itself leaves District 23, the district's security no longer matters."

"And how does she manage that?" said Stiyl mockingly. "I may not be too knowledgeable about aerospace matters, but I do know how large the rockets on the other side of this fence are. If a rocket the size of a radio tower moves even slightly, anyone would notice it."

"Not necessarily," said Kamijou lightly. "The rockets are mostly constructed in District 23. The fuel is even loaded there. But one portion is not. The container portion. In this case, it's a capsule for the probe rather than a satellite. The fuel for the auxiliary boosters used for attitude control is loaded in District 10."

"Why?"

“The liquid fuel used is called hydrazine. Not only is it highly explosive, but it’s toxic. The districts it can be handled in are limited. The biggest of those districts is District 10. They were making a big deal about it on a talk show recently. They were asking what would happen if an accident occurred as the container was being transported and complaining that there would be no risk if it was all handled in District 23.”

“In that case, we need to search out every transport route from District 10 to District 23. Ureapaddy should be in wait along one of them.”

“Wait,” said Kamijou just as Stiyl was about to begin moving. “Even if this is just the container at the top of the rocket, it is still on a very large scale. The truck will be hauling an object twenty meters long. It can’t make the turns of a normal street. The rocket will head along the shortest, widest, and straightest path.”

“Touma, if we head back along that path…”

“We should run right into Ureapaddy along the way.”

Part 10

A giant satellite guidance vehicle was parked on the side of the road on an overpass in District 7. It was as large as a pylon for high voltage lines laid on its side. Given its size and the toxic hydrazine it was loaded with, the surrounding drivers would want to be careful around it. However, none of the other vehicles showed any sign of doing so.

It was almost as if…

As if none of them could tell the satellite guidance vehicle was even there.

“Ureapaddy!!”

A boy suddenly shouted out and opened the driver’s side door of the vehicle to peer inside. A silver-haired, brown-skinned woman frowned. And then she realized what was going on.

Her willingness to actually respond with words demonstrated her confidence.

“Oh? So you have already discovered my name. But that isn’t too surprising given the familiar face I see there.”

Despite the teasing reference to her, Sozty took a step forward.

She tried to say something emotional, but the words caught in her throat. Kamijou found it difficult to watch how her expression visibly stiffened as she forced it to remain as it was.

The girl finally managed to speak to her sister.

"…Is it true you destroyed our cabal?"

"If you mean *your* cabal, then yes I did."

Ureapaddy's lips moved as she made that clear distinction.

She spoke so easily.

She was a stark contrast to Sozty who had needed to force down her emotions so they were only simmering below the surface before she was able to speak. In Ureapaddy's case, her expression remained unchanged because she did not particularly feel anything about the situation. She was so indifferent it seemed her organs had to be completely frozen over.

The older sister and the younger sister.

An obvious discrepancy existed between the two.

"They were nothing but a burden and I had no further use for them. Their plans were always poorly thought out and the scale of their ideas was too small. And yet they would look down on me if I tried to do something with that frozen project. …What use did they have left other than as a disposable decoy?"

"Would I be correct in assuming the same applies to me?"

"Think what you wish. It is true that the incident with you forced my hand a bit, though."

Was she referring to the cabal's attack on Sozty to silence her when she had been captured?

In that case, it was possible some sisterly love still existed between Sozty and Ureapaddy.

But…

"After all, that completely destroyed the already pathetic decoy plan. It wasn't easy reworking my plan for betrayal on the spot."

Sozty had risked her life as a diversion.

She had been prepared to let her sister and comrades escape even if it cost her her life. And yet she received only that coldhearted answer.

In that instant…

Kamijou learned the meaning of true silence.

The smiles from the photo he had seen on Sozty's cell phone appeared in the back of his mind.

Stiyl was an expert in making such severe decisions, yet even he had his breath taken away.

"Damn you…!!" shouted Kamijou as he clenched his fist, but Sozty held a hand out to block his path.

"I have to ask. This may be only a portion of the rocket, but it is still a collection of top secret technology. And it is also filled with toxic fuel. This vehicle had to have some escort vehicles. What happened to them?"

"I eliminated them."

"What happened to the driver of this vehicle?"

"I eliminated him."

The fact that she did not specify what exactly she had done gave them a very bad feeling about what had happened. Both the escort vehicles and the driver were not present. That was all Kamijou and the others knew. They could only pray that they were safe.

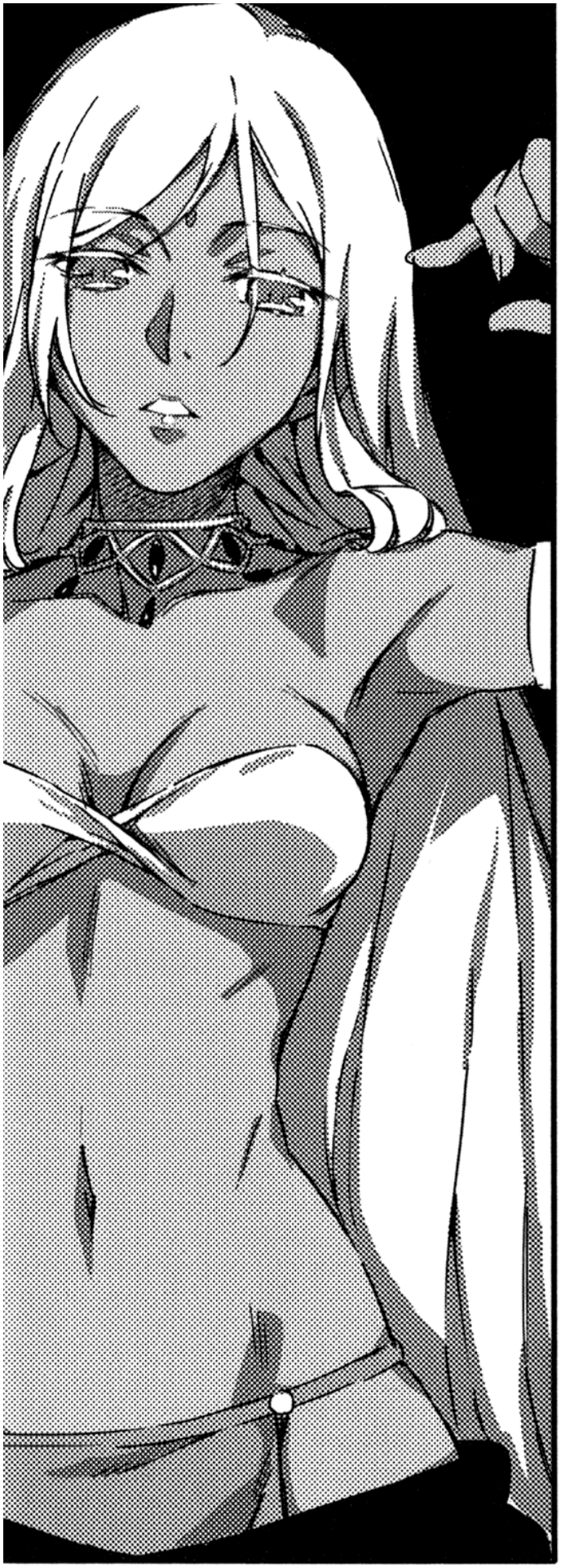
Meanwhile, Ureapaddy grinned and said, "Yes, yes. Asking questions is the best course of action for you as you did not even realize how poor that plan was. And let me be blunt about one thing: truly optimized actions lack all beauty and elegance."

"Are you really one to talk about elegance?" said Sozty with a tone as hard as rock. "You shot your comrades in the back for your own goal and plan to destroy Academy City with no just cause. And all to show off your Brahma Astra that should have been frozen long ago. It seems to me you are the one that looks unsightly due to pursuing optimization too far."

"If you are going to ask any questions, could you keep them short?"

"What are you after?" Sozty's brief question stabbed out. And then she continued, "The overall plans of the cabal were nothing more than a decoy for you. In that case, you have no reason to continue on with the goal of destroying Academy City. I see no reason for you to use Brahma Astra here. Surely using Brahma Astra in and of itself is not your only goal, right?"

"I have no obligation to answer that. But what would you do if I said that was my only goal?"



Ureapaddy tilted her head ever so slightly.

Older sister and younger sister.

And yet Sozty answered without hesitation.

“I would kill you. You are a disgrace.”

Kamijou felt dizzy hearing her say that so plainly. It may have simply been that she had lost her cool at having her sister speak so coldheartedly about her, but Kamijou still felt their conversation had gone too far. Or perhaps this was the standard for the creatures known as magicians.

He glanced over at Stiyl, but the priest’s expression was hidden by his long hair.

“We… The cabal was targeting Academy City because it was necessary. No matter how our actions would later be recorded in history, we decided we had no choice but to carry out the attack.” Sozty spoke her next words as if spitting them out. “And now you’re saying the target doesn’t matter? You just want to use your spell that had been frozen? You’re going to destroy a city of one million just for that? Now I see why the cabal was keeping a careful eye on you. Your ideas need to be thrown into a dark hole and sealed away with a stone.”

“Sozty. Do you really, truly understand what you are talking about?”

“I do,” said Sozty with disinterest. “Seeing someone like you has made me realize the truth. I finally know what it is like to see what I was trying to do from the outside. I am growing angry at the justifications I was making.”

“Sozty…?” said Kamijou in a whisper, but she did not turn in his direction.

She kept her gaze on her enemy and made an announcement in a shout.

“I was wrong!! What we were trying to do is wrong no matter what reason you have. Forcing this onto them does nothing to save the people who would be sacrificed. The existence of a reason makes no difference!! And if it’s wrong with a reason, there is no way I can let you do it without a reason!!”

“Oh.” Ureapaddy gave a thin smile that displayed disinterest from the very bottom of her heart. “So you’ve already made it that far. In that case, I suppose telling you this won’t have that much of an impact on you, will it, Sozty?”

“…?”

“Didn’t you find it bizarre?” continued Ureapaddy in a calm, flowing voice. “The original plan the pathetic leaders of the cabal came up with was to use Agni’s Festival Fire to destroy a few districts, use the confusion to head into the strictly guarded District 23, and then destroy the facilities within. Correct?”

“Looking at it now, that plan makes me want to puke. What about it?”

“Oh? And wasn’t this plan implemented because the cabal works to obtain bodies that surpass the limits using training methods that surpass the limits and so it took issue with Academy City’s optimal training methods using the optimal values?”

“Ah…” muttered Kamijou rather than Sozty.

Ureapaddy smiled in delight.

“It seems that student has figured it out. Don’t you find it odd, Sozty? We were opposed to their methods of training the mind and body, and yet our ultimate objective was to destroy District 23. Their aerospace technology should have been of no consequence to us.”

Sozty seemed completely dumbfounded as she muttered, “Did the cabal have information it was keeping from us?”

“Their true reason for attacking Academy City lay elsewhere. I had hoped to completely shock you by revealing that the justification you held so dear was completely meaningless, but it seems you freed yourself from that curse on your own. I was trying to say I was disappointed my revelation had lost most of its meaning. Do you understand now?”

“…”

“If you learn what it is and what it has brought about, you will finally reach my darkness,” said Ureapaddy. “But that is all for today. I do not have time to spare. My preparations are already complete, so I will be leaving now.”

A loud sound like several simultaneous metallic noises could be heard.

At some point, a giant golden bow had appeared in Ureapaddy’s hand.

A bow.

Or perhaps it should be called an Astra said to be held by the god Brahma.

Once it was fired, it would cleanly tear out a hole with a fifty meter radius in even the sturdiest structure.

“Is that Brahma Astra!?”

“Do not worry, student. The timing has not yet come. Plus, what use is a bow and arrow that always hits the target if I fire it from head on? From your fight against Sozty, it appears you have some powerful means of destroying magic.”

Then what was she targeting?

What was she trying to do?

As soon as those questions came to Kamijou’s mind, Ureapaddy answered them by means of the direction she aimed the bow and arrow.

She aimed at the satellite guidance vehicle.

Specifically, she targeted the rocket container that contained the toxic hydrazine.

“Escape is my top priority today.”

She held a completely normal metal arrow in the bow.

But that was enough.

“So I will give up on this.”

With a dull noise, the arrow pierced into the side of the container.

A hissing sound like carbonation being released could be heard. A clear liquid that was obviously different from water began flowing onto the road surface.

“Not good! That’s hydrazine!!” shouted Kamijou.

Ureapaddy smiled and stepped back. She then prepared to run. She would not allow them to follow her. It was blatantly obvious that was her intention.

Index then spoke to Stiyl.

“You can use Anglican-style spells, right? Blow that away with your flames!!”

Her statement sounded insane.

But it was not.

She added, “If I am correct, the base is fire and the meaning is punishment, but add purification to the third and fifth words and loop it. In English, the initials are P, A, and R. That will cancel out the target’s toxicity!!”

"...I see."

How had Stiyl felt about that "advice"?

How had that magician felt when he was briefly put back in the position he had once viewed as normal?

Without speaking much, Stiyl Magnus quickly took action.

The roar of flames consuming oxygen burst out.

A sword of flame appeared in the priest's right hand.

For the first time, a bit of nervousness appeared on Ureapaddy's face.

She was likely worried she would be caught in the explosion.

"What a wonderful expression."

With his lips twisted into a smile, Stiyl swung his flame sword without hesitation.

Its form collapsed and it shot directly for the leaking hydrazine.

In the next instant, a great explosion wiped away the darkness of Academy City's night.

Part 11

Ureapaddy may have removed the spell she had set up when the explosion occurred. Or perhaps the explosive power had destroyed the spell. Either way, the people in the surrounding areas finally became aware of the disturbance on the overpass.

Kamijou and the others rushed down the emergency staircase and to the ground as they heard the approaching sirens of fire trucks.

"I think Ureapaddy escaped. I felt no resistance," said Stiyl.

Sozty then let out a confused voice.

"But wait. Wait a second. My sister was trying to sabotage the rocket container being transported so she could use Brahma Astra, right? In that case, why did she so readily abandon the container?"

“Once we had determined which rocket it was, we would never let it actually be launched. She had to have known that, so she had no reason to hold on to it.”

“Touma, does that mean Ureapaddy will target another ‘rocket’ and wait for her chance to attack?”

If so, the issue was simple.

They knew their enemy’s target, so they could lay a trap. Or they could temporarily halt the work with the rockets to put a stop to Ureapaddy’s plan. If they could locate her while she was stalled, they would have a chance to attack.

However…

“I don’t think Ureapaddy would so readily abandon that rocket container if she understood that we knew what she was trying to do. She would have known we would guard all other rockets afterwards, so it at least would not have been an easy decision,” said Stiyl. “She would have either tried to have that rocket container launched no matter what or she would have tried to kill us. That situation could easily have been the deciding factor over whether her plan succeeds or not, so she should have been desperate. And yet…”

“So if she readily abandoned it, does it mean she has some other way of accomplishing her plan…?”

Just as Kamijou said that, he saw something unpleasant in the corner of his vision.

It was a completely normal site in any district of Academy City. It could easily be called a part of the standard background scenery. It was an airship. The giant monitor on its side that acted like a billboard was displaying world news.

“The Venus Probe Contest is progressing quite well. The EU Space Industry Committee has commented that their overall level of technology may be lower, but that they have tempered traditions and expert skills from their work in clock craftsmanship and the like. They say the results of those craftsmen will be the pride of the world. The private projects in the rocket industry have…”

“Wait…it can’t be…”

“Let me guess what you are thinking,” said Stiyl with an exceedingly displeased look. “Ureapaddy had already sabotaged a few rockets outside before arriving at Academy City. The rockets within the city were nothing more than insurance. The sabotaged rockets will follow a strict time schedule and be launched at a time that is convenient to Ureapaddy’s plan.”

It was not rare for the timing of rocket launches to be off a bit due to delays in preparation or weather conditions.

If one wanted to ensure that a rocket would be launched at a certain time, one would want to prepare a few layers of safety by preparing several rockets to launch at the same time in several different places.

“Is that why she was able to abandon this rocket?” muttered Kamijou before turning to Sozty. “H-hey, the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens is based in India, right? What path did you take to reach Academy City!?”

“The worst possible one. I was just thinking about it.”

“Can you be more specific!?”

“We split into several groups and met up in Tokyo. I was with my sister. We travelled from India to Russia, flew to a German airport, travelled by land to France, passed through England, flew from there to America, and finally headed to Japan via Australia. Dammit. All of those countries are involved in the Venus Probe Contest!!”

Sozty’s face was pale as she spoke.

France and England had no surface launching facilities, but they could use islands in the Pacific and also had projects to send satellites into the atmosphere using two-stage rockets fired from civilian aircrafts flying at ultra high altitude. Kamijou had heard about those projects on the world news on TV because the countries had made sure to make thorough announcements to ensure no one mistook them for bombers loaded with cruise missiles.

Naturally, they could not deny the possibility that she had sabotaged the rockets when they were in transit on the ground just as she had attempted here.

“No one knows how many rockets my sister has sabotaged. And with it involving so many different groups, no single authority can halt all the launches! The Venus Probe Contest is underway. No one is going to listen to someone who tells them to stop. Those who do not understand the situation will simply see it as an attempt at interference!!”

“The real problem is the destructive power of Brahma Astra,” said Index as she thought. “It is a spiritual item named after the weapon of the god Brahma. And according to Ureapaddy, it has extremely high accuracy. I do not know how accurately the legend has been recreated, but if they were attempting to match the original, they must have been trying to amplify its power to the very limit.”

“Meaning?”

“It is highly likely Ureapaddy’s Brahma Astra has been forcibly given the destructive power worthy of being called the most powerful weapon within the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens. Not only does it have perfect accuracy, but it creates a ridiculously huge explosion when it hits. According to the past data, it destroyed everything for fifty meters around it, but who knows how far its power has been amplified. And if something like that is fired at Academy City…”

An unpleasant feeling welled up in Kamijou’s chest.

Ureapaddy’s objective was unknown, but from her past actions, it seemed unlikely she would let her chance slip by her after making all those preparations.

She would most definitely fire the weapon.

Kamijou could not imagine how much damage would be caused by an arrow of the god of destruction.

“What are we supposed to do?” asked Sozty. “My sister already has Brahma Astra. She can remotely detonate rockets to create the three shooting stars she needs to fire it. No one knows where those rockets are. For all we know, they have already been launched!!”

“Thinking about the sabotaged rockets will get us nowhere,” replied Kamijou. He tightly clenched his right fist that could negate any magic. “So our only option is to destroy Ureapaddy’s Brahma Astra. There is no other way to protect Academy City.”

CHAPTER 4

Part 1

Despite their enthusiasm, Kamijou and the others could find no sign of Ureapaddy no matter how much they ran around Academy City.

She had already crushed the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens in order to eliminate any clues leading to her. Sozty had the most accurate information on her, but not even her information and experiences were of any use if Ureapaddy began fleeing or hiding using different methods.

Dawn had already begun.

As he breathed heavily, Stiyl said, “Tch. We lost our chance. Ureapaddy has completely hidden herself. This is no longer at a stage where we have any chance of running into her by searching at random.”

“Do we really have time to leisurely think up a new plan? If one of the rockets she sabotaged is detonated overhead, she’ll be able to use Brahma Astra.”

“I have received word from Academy City.” Stiyl lightly waved his cell phone. “The rocket container that Ureapaddy tried to sabotage and that we destroyed was scheduled to be launched at 9 PM three days from now. She likely chose rockets scheduled for that same time when she was sabotaging rockets outside the city, too. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“You mean Ureapaddy can’t use Brahma Astra without waiting three days?”

“You are truly a brilliant thinker. I am glad to see you can answer questions so difficult even a second grader could answer them,” said Stiyl mockingly. “In that case, thinking up an effective plan to corner Ureapaddy would be better than wasting our time wandering around at random. You should take this chance to rest so your already useless head does not rust over with drowsiness.”

“And what will you do?”

“I do not want to give Ureapaddy a chance to restore her strength. I will leave signs of activity around the city that only a magician can see. If it goes well, she will be too cautious to sleep. Magic is a battle of wits, so those small factors can greatly influence the outcome of the final strike.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“If you have time to respond in such meaningless ways, then get to somewhere where you will be unseen,” said Stiyl. “Also, I do not currently have access to the equipment to reliably restrain Sozty Exica. Give her food and a place to sleep to build some temporary trust. You might be able to gain some information on Ureapaddy that Sozty is hiding.”

That was likely just the “official reason” Stiyl had to give as a representative of the Anglican Church. Kamijou said he would do so and then walked back to Index and Sozty.

Unsurprisingly, Sozty was opposed to the idea of getting some sleep somewhere. She wanted to pursue her sister right away. But they had no clear hints and they had three days to spare.

What would be the most efficient way to make use of those three days?

At the very least, the answer was not to randomly run around a city of 2.3 million in the hopes of “just so happening” to run across a single individual.

“We have no pursuers from the Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens and Ureapaddy Exica has no reason to go out of her way to hunt us down, but Anti-Skill will be keeping an eye on my dorm after we snuck out of the hospital.” Kamijou sounded a bit annoyed at that. “Well, if we just need to sleep, any 24 hour business should suffice. A manga café, a hamburger shop, or a family restaurant would be the standard options.”

“Y-y-you mean we’ll be staying in a restaurant for 24 hours!? Touma, that sounds like paradise! Let’s go right now!!”

“In cases like this, you make sure a single cup of coffee lasts as long as possible!! If you eat everything in sight the entire time, the cost will exceed that of a room in a resort hotel!!”

Since it was the morning, they wanted to avoid restaurants that were busy during that time due to their morning meals. If the restaurant was very busy, the workers would begin glaring at anyone who was asleep at one of the tables.

And since incidences of runaway children were quite common in a city of 80% students, Anti-Skill had specialized officers for that sort of thing. Kamijou and the others had to make sure they were not caught by one of those patrols.

Sozty sighed.

“I don’t understand the local rules of Academy City. Can I just leave this decision up to you? It seems to me most any 24 hour restaurant will have some special morning meal.”

“We can use that to our advantage,” replied Kamijou simply. “Anti-Skill’s runaway children team will assume no runaway kids will head to the busy restaurants with morning meals. But not every restaurant has such great business. If we choose a restaurant that has morning meals but is not as busy, we can stay for a long period of time without issue and Anti-Skill won’t stop by to check.”

Part 2

The location Kamijou and the others used as a makeshift inn was a 24 hour ramen restaurant. The restaurant was busiest during midday and late night, so it was fairly empty during the morning. Most people likely decided it was too greasy for their stomachs right after waking up.

The restaurant was almost completely empty, but it must have had a cycle of profit established because the workers did not seem particularly worried or resigned. In fact, they seemed to feel lucky to have such little business.

“A half serving of fried rice.”

“Edamame.”

“One chashu in an ultra-deluxe super-size that is reminiscent of the bubble era!!”

“Which one of you is the glutton who has completely forgotten we’re supposed to be showing restraint here!?” shouted Kamijou, but the white nun feigned ignorance.

They were planning to stay for a long period of time, so they of course could not eat all of their food as soon as they arrived. After intentionally leaving half of their food, Kamijou and Sozty quickly lay their heads down on the table. Index alone was left combating a bowl the size of a large plate of yakiniku.

With her cheek pressed against the table, Sozty whispered, “This was a failure.”

“What was?”

“This table is really sticky. That is the fate of any table that holds Chinese food, but it is a poor choice for a pillow.”

“Don’t underestimate runaway children. Were you expecting to have a nice blanket and a pillow made of a low-resilience material?”

Whether it was due to the country being safe or a desire to make efficient use of all time available, the Japanese were a people who could sleep in a crowded train or in the ridiculously small desks of a classroom.

“I can put up with it, but this stickiness reminds me of something.”

“?”

“I haven’t had a bath in a while. You can’t detect your own scent, so am I starting to smell?”

Kamijou’s eyes suddenly opened wide.

“You fool!! If you think you can force the situation into a public bath scene, you are mistaken!!”

“…What?”

“I won’t fall for that trick again! Do you think I like having my head bitten by that glutton every single time!?”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say, but be quiet. We’re trying to remain hidden.”

With a question mark floating over her head, Sozty tried to get Kamijou to restrain himself.

She then brought her upper arm toward her nose.

“But it might be hard to stay hidden if I smell too bad. Hey, I can’t tell how I smell, so you tell me.”

“Ehh?”

Sozty brought her upper body towards Kamijou’s face.

…She smelled like a normal girl.

“…I’m not sure what to say.”

“What is it? Is it that bad?”

“That isn’t what I meant…”

“If you have something to say, then say it. I can’t decide what to do next otherwise.”

“…Touma?”

Index must have caught a dangerous scent on the air because her canine teeth were glittering.

Kamijou laid his head back on the table in a desperate attempt to fool her.

He needed to change the course of the conversation.

(Hard to starboard!!)

“By the way, what do you think Ureapaddy is doing?”

“I don’t know. She might be lounging on the top floor of a resort hotel or she might be struggling by in a cardboard box on the streets. My sister has diverged from the cabal’s usual patterns to make all my information worthless. I have no way of knowing what she might be doing.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything specific. There have to be other conditions that make Brahma Astra easier to use. Where do you think she might plan to use it?”

“Like I said: I don’t know. For one thing, we have no way of calculating its range or power. But it does need to use the shooting stars, so I guess she would choose a spot where the stars are clearly visible.”

“That would make District 21 suspicious since it specializes in astronomical observation facilities.”

“We wouldn’t be having so much trouble if she was in any of the obvious places.”

Kamijou agreed with her there.

They could not guess what Ureapaddy was thinking. She had sabotaged multiple rockets inside and outside Academy City and they would simultaneously detonate to create a large number of artificial shooting stars. The overall idea was simple enough to understand, but another thought had occurred to Kamijou.

If she had been able to prepare multiple levels of insurance without even entering Academy City, why had she felt the need to go after the rockets inside the city?

Wouldn’t it have been safer for Ureapaddy to sneak into District 21 from the beginning and simply wait for the proper timing to use Brahma Astra?

“She might have strayed from the simplest and quickest route in order to make my information even more useless,” said Sozty as she laid her head on the table. “But that means she was increasing the level of visible risk to eliminate an invisible risk. If we can effectively increase those suspicions of hers, she might give us some kind of hint.”

Part 3

The chairs were cramped, the table was sticky, and the noises of food preparation never ended, so it was not an environment conducive to sleep. Nevertheless, Kamijou and the others slept like a log until just before noon.

This meant Kamijou was skipping school, but he was in no situation to worry about that.

“I still have found no information on Ureapaddy,” said Stiyl via the prepaid cell phone. “Due to the attack on the satellite guidance vehicle, she is officially being treated as a possible important witness by Academy City. She has probably used some sort of spell to avoid being questioned by Anti-Skill. If I can find traces of that, I might be able to locate her.”

“Understood. What should we do?”

“Nothing in particular. Just ask Sozty about likely spots for using Brahma Astra and go around to each one.”

“Won’t that just leave us checking out the places Ureapaddy will most likely be avoiding?”

“It does not matter. We just need to give her the impression that we are tracking her down little by little. Sozty’s information and Index’s massive knowledge alone should be putting mental pressure on Ureapaddy. Even if we never find the right answer, she might make a mistake if she thinks we will.”

“So no matter what we do, we’re still waiting for her to make some kind of move?”

“It looks that way at first glance. But this will be decided by how much we can restrict Ureapaddy’s freedom and options during these three days. Even if it is only a bluff, we need to seal off the ‘large pathways’ as soon as possible. That way, if Ureapaddy later feels she has reached a stalemate, she will be forced to take some bold action that is more likely to leave us a crucial hint.”

If no matter what they did they could only wait for Ureapaddy to take some kind of action, they could not move the situation forward. It was possible they could be stuck in this stalled state all the way up to the time limit in three days.

And Ureapaddy of course did not want to be found. This was not a boy scout athletic event, so she would not leave behind obvious footprints or memos detailing her path as she travelled to her goal.

“So we just have to hope our enemy can still be shaken.”

“Exactly.”

The call with Stiyl ended.

Kamijou and the others left the ramen restaurant they had used in place of an inn and prepared to follow Stiyl’s instructions. Sozty seemed irritated that they were not striking a decisive blow, but she did not have any dramatic alternative ideas.

She said, “As I said before taking that nap, she will probably give priority to areas from which the stars are visible because the spell uses shooting stars. It would be best to go around to each of those places and set up a surveillance spiritual item.”

Index spoke up from the side.

“Touma, we need to focus on setting up a large number of them. Instead of hoping to actually catch Ureapaddy with the spiritual items, we can worry her by setting up lower level ones.”

“…? But Index, these surveillance spiritual items…they’re like cameras, right? Wouldn’t finding Ureapaddy with one of them be the best case scenario?”

Index sighed at Kamijou’s question.

“If we go all out in the creation of the spiritual items, we can only make so many. And if Ureapaddy knows we are getting serious, she will realize this is all we have. But if we create exceedingly simply-made spiritual items…”

“It will not take much time to make enough of them and my sister will have a harder time analyzing our ability if she happens to spot one. We just need to make her think we intentionally let her find it in order to guide her in a certain direction.”

“I see,” said Kamijou with a nod.

Their objective was to worry Ureapaddy. To do that, it was better to give an impression of taking meaningful roundabout actions rather than running down a direct path.

“Well, I guess the obvious place to start would be District 21. It’s such a mountainous area that it’s often used for astronomical observation facilities.”

Kamijou brought to mind the bus and train route maps in order to guide Index and Sozty.

But then…

“…?”

A painful sound tickled at Kamijou's eardrums.

It sounded like television static.

Kamijou looked around in confusion. And then he spotted it. It was the large screen on the side wall of a department store. The screen had been displaying the sales rankings for new songs, but it went black just after emitting that static.

"What?"

And it did not end there. The destination display on a bus running nearby grew horribly garbled, the traffic lights started blinking with more than one light lit up at a time, and the cell phone in Kamijou's pocket began emitting out-of-tune electronic tones very different from its set ringtone.

"Wah, wah! Touma, everything around here is going crazy!"

"The airship's screen is messed up too. This seems to be pretty widespread."

Index and Sozty seemed completely shocked by the situation.

For an instant, Kamijou put himself on guard because he recalled that Agni's Festival Fire roasted people by amplifying the output of electromagnetic waves, but the situation did not develop that far. All electronics and other devices that used electromagnetic signals began malfunctioning, but nothing beyond that occurred.

He did not know what was causing it, but Kamijou pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

The phone was still emitting ridiculous electronic tones as if someone was randomly hitting the keys of a keyboard, but it seemed he was receiving a call from someone. He could not say anything more than "someone" because the screen was a mess of garbled text and nothing readable remained.

Among all of the oddities occurring, this was the only one Kamijou's group could actually respond to.

Normally, answering a call from an unknown person held various risks such as it being some form of phone scam. However, the current situation held greater weight than those risks. Kamijou pressed the "accept call" button with his thumb in order to escape the pressure.

He then heard the voice of an unexpected person.

"…Ksshh… Kuroko, there's a…of static, but can…hear me? …I have no…how long…phone call…last, so…listen. I…no time to answer questions…"

“Misaka?” muttered Kamijou in shock, but it seemed his voice was not reaching her.

In fact, he was doubtful the call had been meant for him.

He was pretty sure she did not know his number.

(Did some lines get mixed up due to whatever is causing all this strange static?)

It seemed Misaka Mikoto did not realize this.

She continued speaking.

“Kuroko, you all are probably…aware of…but a cooperative institution…in Australia…firing a ballistic shell…using a mass driver. It will…outside the atmosphere and…straight down on Academy City. It seems…city plans to…a device called Debris Storm…”

“What…?”

Some strange terms were mixed in with the staticky voice coming from his phone. One of them was “Debris Storm”.

“The device manipulates the flow of solar wind to…all of the space debris around…planet. If…succeeds, tens…thousands of pieces of debris…at several kilometers per second. The sandstorm-like…will fly around in space to…any suspicious objects. Whether…UFO or ballistic missile…be shot down with perfect accuracy. It is like a…missile defense net on…worldwide scale…”

A device that manipulated the tens of thousands of pieces of debris floating around the planet.

A device that could turn every one of them into a shooting star if used right.

“Not good! You have got to be kidding me!!”

“But…still only…the prototype phase. All of…electromagnetic interference is likely…side effect of the collision between…winds and debris not progressing as…had hoped. So Kuroko…no guarantee Debris Storm will…properly. We need to…”

The static grew more intense. No matter how much Kamijou shouted, Mikoto did not respond. At some point, the connection had ended. Even when he tried to redial, he did not even receive an automatic message.

“What is it?” asked Sozty, but Kamijou did not respond for a bit.

If that information had been correct, their initial assumption had just crumbled out from underneath them.

In other words…

“There might never have been a three day time limit…”

“What do you mean, Touma?”

“We assumed Ureapaddy planned to create artificial shooting stars by detonating sabotaged rockets when they were launched. But she never had to do that. There are already tens of thousands of pieces of trash called space debris floating around the planet. And if Academy City has a technology that can manipulate them…”

Ureapaddy’s attack on the Academy City satellite guidance vehicle had seemed nonsensical at first glance. If she had already sabotaged several rockets outside of the city, why had she taken the great risk to sabotage one inside the city as well?

But the situation changed if she had never needed any rockets in the first place. If she had not needed the rocket itself, why had Ureapaddy attacked that satellite guidance vehicle?

“The equipment and facilities related to space are concentrated in District 23. The same likely goes for this Debris Storm that can manipulate space debris. Normally, she would be unable to easily infiltrate that district. But the attitude control computer for the container on the top of the rocket is directly linked to the control system in District 23. If she was able to use that to take control of the Debris Storm equipment…”

“Would my sister be able to create tens of thousands of shooting stars whenever she wants?” muttered Sozty in utter shock.

Tens of thousands of pieces of space debris.

With that, the scale would spread beyond the sky above Academy City.

It was best to assume the skies above every part of the planet would be filled with shooting stars.

Part 4

Kamijou had no idea why, but the electromagnetic interference caused by Debris Storm would increase and decrease over time. During one of the relatively calm periods, Stiyl called the prepaid cell phone.

He seemed to want Kamijou’s opinion on the interference as a member of the science side, but Stiyl’s tone grew even more displeased when he heard what Kamijou had to say.

"…This could not be worse."

"But Debris Storm is an Academy City system. And it's only in the prototype phase. I doubt someone from outside the city would have enough data processing skill to take control of it."

"The details are unknown, but it would be best not to rely on that. Ureapaddy will have been aware of the level of difficulty when she put together her plan. Academy City has not said a word to me about this Debris Storm. Why do you think that is?"

"Why?" Kamijou thought for a moment. "They might not have thought it had anything to do with the issue at hand. Or the value of the information was too great to tell you. Or…"

"Or the situation is simply too dangerous and they did not want to bear the responsibility that would arise from explaining it," spat out Stiyl. "Technology that can freely manipulate tens of thousands of pieces of space debris would be able to shoot down the missiles, rockets, satellites, and space stations of every nation and organization on the planet. And it does not matter if the destroyed equipment was being used for military or peaceful purposes. Revealing the existence of the system would be dangerous enough on its own, so having it get out that some unknown person had taken control of it would simply be too great a problem. If that is what Academy City fears…"

"Then Academy City is legitimately afraid Ureapaddy will take control of the system…?"

"As you said, it is unlikely someone from outside Academy City would have the skills needed to break through Debris Storm's security. It is possible Ureapaddy is working with someone inside your city." Stiyl left a moment of silence. "What matters to us is the specific benefit Ureapaddy's Brahma Astra receives from the countless shooting stars created by Debris Storm. Can you get any information out of Sozty?"

Kamijou moved the prepaid phone away from his mouth and looked to Sozty. She thought for a bit after he asked her the question.

"Well… If shooting stars fill the skies around the world, she can likely set her target of attack to coordinates anywhere in the world. In other words, whatever person or location my sister targets will meet its end as soon as she fires the arrow no matter where it is on the planet. Also," added Sozty. "Naturally, our cabal performed experiments and tests to strengthen the power of Brahma Astra. However, I never heard anything about those experiments having anything to do with the number of shooting stars. It also seems odd given the construction of the spell."

"You said the shooting stars are needed to aim, right? So does this increase her accuracy?"

“The arrow would never miss in the first place, so she would have no need to increase the accuracy. I can only think of one benefit she could gain from altering how the spell’s targeting works.” Sozty’s expression grew grim. “Targeting for multiple simultaneous shots. Raising the limit of how many arrows can be fired at once. Brahma Astra can be fired when three shooting stars exist in the sky at once. Dividing ‘tens of thousands’ by three may give us her new limit. Or if the targeting uses the triangle created by the three stars and the same shooting stars can be used in multiple triangles, her upper limit would expand to several times or even dozens of times greater than the amount of space debris.”

Ureapaddy had arrows that would never miss once they were fired.

She could fire them at a location anywhere in the world.

And she could fire tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of them simultaneously.

Whether one hid deep underground or flew through the sky in an airplane, the attack would pierce straight through any intervening obstacles in the way and destroy everything in a clean fifty meter radius around the target.

“This goes well beyond Academy City,” said Stiyl. “She can target the leaders of every single cooperative institution around the world and still have plenty of shots left over. She could easily slaughter the leaders of the entire science side.”

Having just one leader defeated would be a major problem, but the actual system of society could still recover.

But what if all of them were killed at once?

All of those who were meant to help a recovery would be gone. The water and power infrastructures, law enforcement, and everything else supporting the society would come to a halt. The damage would go beyond political arguments on TV; it would quickly erupt in the form of crimes and riots. If that happened, it was impossible to guess how far the damage would spread.

Some would have their everyday discontent explode out, some would fight over who would now stand at the top of those organizations and systems, some would try to protect others from the rioters, some would loot, some would try to restore the military and police to power, and eventually someone would shoot someone else over any one of those issues.

And that first deadly bullet would begin a chain reaction that spilled much more blood than Ureapaddy’s Brahma Astra would directly.

“We have no way of knowing when Ureapaddy will use Debris Storm to create the shooting stars. It could be beginning right now for all we know.”

“No, wait,” said Sozty suddenly. “If my sister is trying to use this Debris Storm to fire a large number of arrows at once, how is she going to obtain the magic power needed for it?”

“…You’re going to have to explain it better than that.”

“All of those shooting stars will appear way, way above our heads. I don’t know exactly how high, but she cannot use leylines or anything similar to transfer her will to somewhere so high up. If she simply sends her magic power through the air, it will attenuate. Even if she can manage a shot or two like that, tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands would simply be impossible. She would need some kind conductive material to prevent the attenuation, but I can’t think of any conductive material that stretches from the earth all the way up into space.”

Stiyl must have been able to hear her speaking because Kamijou heard him sigh.

“…There is one.”

“What?”

“The driver of the satellite guidance vehicle survived. I spoke to him while secretly transporting him to the hospital. I did not receive any hints regarding Ureapaddy’s location or objective, but I did hear something of great interest.”

“And what was that?”

“A space elevator project.”

Kamijou’s breath caught in his throat when he heard that answer that almost sounded like a joke.

Stiyl continued speaking.

“The driver was complaining that he would not have been involved in the dangers of that troublesome job if the space elevator had been completed. And just so you know: his story was quite credible. As a resident of Academy City, I’m sure you know about the Venus Probe Contest.”

“Y-yeah. Around four hundred groups are taking part in it.”

“It seems that large-scale contest is only camouflage to transport a large amount of materials into space. Those materials are needed to construct the spaceport at the top of the space elevator.”

They of course had a reason to do so in secret.

Countries around the world spent massive amounts of money on rocket technology. For that reason, the number of rockets launched was limited. However, a space elevator that could transport any number of items into space at the press of a button would overturn the accepted methods of the world.

And that technology could also be used for military purposes.

What would happen if a massive amount of explosives were transported into space with the elevator and thrown into orbit? Any location on earth could be bombed as easily as tossing aside an empty drink can.

An elevator that could easily transport massive amounts of explosives into orbit would allow a high density barrage or minefield to be set up in order to intercept an enemy nation's missiles. It might not be enough to destroy the idea of nuclear deterrence, but it would at least greatly change the balance of power.

"This is not simply an issue for the science side," said Stiyl. "This situation could also affect the balance between magic and science. Many of the spells we use have a strong focus on the arrangement and power of the stars. We never wanted the night sky to be filled with satellites and debris. ...And this elevator would be like a smokestack spewing out a new form of pollution into space. Given prior notice, we would have tried to crush it diplomatically."

As she listened from the side, Sozty sighed and said, "Also, leylines are strongly affected by the landscape. Even in this country, it is well known that Kyoto was originally designed around the principles of feng shui. A structure that large would be on a mythological level. Whether it was created with magical knowledge or not, it will greatly change the flow of power."

It was because they had known all of this that they had remained silent about it.

They had said nothing until it was too late to stop its construction.

"The Gate of the Gods Come from the Heavens' original plan had District 23 as the top priority target, right? And yet that district had little to do with their supposed reason for the attack. Could they have known about the space elevator construction project?"

"Possibly. Given the name of the cabal, they probably viewed astronomical issues as important. Not that this matters much since they have already been defeated." Stiyl quickly changed the subject to the issue at hand. "At any rate, we know Ureapaddy can fire tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of Brahma Astra arrows simultaneously by creating a massive amount of shooting stars with Debris Storm and using the shaft of the space elevator to efficiently conduct her magic power into space. The timing is up to the program Ureapaddy has set and that time might already be up."

“But if Ureapaddy is using the shaft of the space elevator, she has to be at the earthport located at the base of the elevator.”

“Do you know where it might be?”

“This time, it’s definitely District 23,” said Kamijou definitively. “She might not be able to get in normally, but this electromagnetic interference will have impacted the defensive systems. She should be able to freely enter right now.”

CHAPTER 5

Part 1

They had no time.

Kamijou and the others headed to a mall filled with restaurants that truck drivers frequented. They were of course not planning to eat anything. They were instead searching for a truck heading to District 23 out of all the ones parked there.

“The satellite guidance vehicles have a sticker indicating they have been approved. Here we go.”

Kamijou and the others opened up the door for the container on the back and hid inside. Academy City’s buses and trains stopped running after the curfew, so they had to use a bit of cleverness to hurry to a distant location.

After finishing his meal, the driver drove the vehicle away without realizing they were there.

Stiyl spoke within the container.

“We will use this truck to head to District 18 which neighbors District 23. After that, we have to break in. Our only hope is to climb the fence and force our way in.”

“The security is in shambles thanks to the trouble caused by that interference, so it shouldn’t be a problem on its own.”

“The only problem left is my sister,” added Sozty as she leaned against the container’s door. “The project my sister took part in was special even within the cabal. Her entire body was completely remade to meet the usage requirements of Brahma Astra. I have no idea what she might be capable of.”

Index tilted her head in confusion and asked, “You mentioned that before, but does it mean she has been so specialized for Brahma Astra that she cannot use any other spells?”

“No. When I worked alongside my sister on missions in the past, I saw her using other Astras. In other words, she can use other attack spells. Because the experiment failed, she switched over to using Astras related to the god Shiva. But those are not as pure as the Brahma Astra. They are on a level I could use as well.” Sozty hung her head down as

if she was trying to remember something. “Trishula, Gandiva… They are all related to Shiva, the god of destruction. If we think of Brahma Astra as a special case, that might be a set rule governing the weapons she normally uses.”

“But we can’t forget that Ureapaddy has intentionally regulated what she reveals to you in order to fool you. She may have purposefully narrowed down the information she gave you so you would analyze it in that way.”

“Exactly. We need to assume there is a chance she will suddenly use Astras of Vishnu, Brahma, or other gods. In other words, it is useless to think about it. We could fall into a trap of hers.”

Either way, an amateur like Kamijou could not calculate out the exact structure of the magic to either neutralize or counteract it, so he decided to keep his thoughts positive. He would be on the lookout for attacks from every direction and intercept them with his right hand. In other words, what he always did.

Stiyl frowned slightly and said, “Since Ureapaddy is trying to use Debris Storm to cover the world in tens of thousands of shooting stars, her target is likely more than just Academy City. And no one knows when the attack will happen. In that case, speed is what matters most. The grimoire library can remain as backup, but Kamijou Touma, Sozty, and I must be prepared to take some injuries.”

“I understand,” said Sozty through clenched teeth. “She is justifying it with some ridiculous hope, but my sister is giving up every part of her life for this day. If she is trying to wear away her entire life, I cannot expect to remain unharmed.”

“But it goes no further than injuries,” said Kamijou as if to cut her off. He continued when everyone’s attention was focused on him. “I will not let anyone die. Not us, not Ureapaddy, and not the people she is targeting with Brahma Astra.”

Stiyl clicked his tongue.

That was when the truck they were riding on came to a stop. This was not simply a traffic light; its engine shut off. They assumed they had reached their destination of District 23.

And they were not wrong.

However, when Kamijou cautiously opened up the container door to peer outside, he found a large parking lot lit up by large lights of the sort found at a baseball stadium.

And…

“What?”

A great pounding noise struck his eardrums.

It came from the footsteps of a large group of Anti-Skill. They were fully equipped and even held guns in their hands. Kamijou initially assumed they must have stumbled across some kind of incident, but he was wrong. As soon as his eyes met those of Anti-Skill, the guns all aimed in his direction.

“Shit!!”

He frantically escaped back into the container just as several gun shots exploded through the air. Orange sparks flew from the metal door.

“What the hell is going on!?”

“We are trying to use this confusion to sneak into District 23. Is it that surprising that they are treating us as dangerous?” responded Sozty in annoyance.

But Stiyl raised an objection. “But how did they get this information? Sozty, the grimoire library, and I are experts from the magic side. I doubt standard law enforcement could have detected our actions.”

“What is this then?”

“To help lessen the friction between the magic side and science side, I provide periodic reports on my actions. I of course leave out any unnecessary information, but I do not doubt they use the information I give them. In other words, the higher ups of the science side must truly not want us to approach that space elevator.”

“Why? Brahma Astra could be activated at any time! If that happens, there will be no magic or science. Everything will be destroyed!”

“There has been a lot of fighting between magic and science over who has the rights to space. You could call it the gold rush of the modern age,” spat out Sozty. “Even if my sister is planning to use Brahma Astra and no matter how much damage it will do, we could be using this as a chance to sabotage the space elevator. That is probably how they are viewing this.”

“What are we supposed to do!? This is no time for two groups of protectors to be fighting each other!!”

The Imagine Breaker power in Kamijou’s right hand would have no effect against a normal bullet. And this was a group of professionals whose everyday job was to suppress criminals who wielded supernatural esper powers. This was not an opponent he could easily break through.

“They are focusing on the single door to this container. I will slice through another wall with my flame sword so we can escape. After that, we will all flee via different routes,” suggested Stiyl. “At least one of us needs to get further into District 23. With the urgent

situation regarding Ureapaddy and Brahma Astra, we cannot all be held back here. Kamijou Touma, can you calculate out candidates for routes?"

"District 23 is mostly made up of wide open spaces to provide room for the large runways. They will be able to see where we are at a glance. …Or so Anti-Skill will think. They will not bother to check behind the small pieces of cover. If we keep our path along those areas, we might be able to continue on without being noticed."

"Then tell me what the most dangerous routes are. Sozty and I can use concealment magic to head unseen through the areas Anti-Skill is most confident are safe. You two head along the routes with the most cover."

"Understood. And it would be great if you could cause a few diversions along the way."

"Deal with this on your own."

"Fine then."

With an unpleasant noise, Stiyl sliced through the thick wall of the container. Kamijou and the others exited onto the large parking lot and split up as they slipped through the gaps between the large vehicles lined up there.

Kamijou spotted a few of Anti-Skill's guns turn in his direction.

(Not good.)

As soon as he thought that…

The large baseball stadium-like lights suddenly shut off.

All of a sudden, darkness arrived.

Kamijou had no idea what had caused the blackout, but this was their chance

Kamijou turned toward Stiyl and shouted, "Put out your flames! We can escape now!!"

Anti-Skill's bullets caused sparks nearby, but fortunately even their professional training was not enough for perfect accuracy at that distance.

It was unclear whether Anti-Skill had night-vision equipment or not, but Kamijou and the others could still gain some distance while they switched over to using it.

Kamijou Touma, Index, Stiyl Magnus, and Sozty Exica.

Those four scattered to different areas as they all headed for a single destination.

Part 2

The brown-skinned, silver-haired woman named Ureapaddy Exica stood at the base of the “tower”.

Officially, it was known as a large-scale air traffic control tower. By the time the world learned it played the role of the earthport at the surface-side end of a space elevator, it would be too late. The elevator could cheaply, reliably, and quickly transport large amounts of materials into space. The age had come where regions across the world would need to fear explosives raining down from the heavens and where a minefield could be laid in space that had such high density that it could completely defend against the thousands or tens of thousands of ballistic missiles fired to destroy that demonic tower.

Academy City would have a monopoly on space.

And the risk seen in that fact was not limited to the science side that launched rockets and shuttles. In fields such as astrology, the magic side had made use of outer space for much longer than the science side had.

It had been a dangerous project from the beginning.

If Ureapaddy had not come, something else would likely have happened.

“The development has already reached the seventh stage. The construction of the wire for the initial work has been completed,” muttered Ureapaddy.

The most difficult aspect of constructing a space elevator was hanging a single wire down from space to connect the spaceport and earthport. From what she had heard, that alone had taken several years.

The construction of that single wire could only be done by relying on the old method of launching rocket after rocket. But once that was complete, the speed of the work would rise dramatically.

A tower reaching up into space.

Normally, even several decades would not have been enough to create something like that.

However, Academy City had given each individual block of the tower the ability to function as an unmanned mobile robot. Hundreds of million or even billions of such blocks would move along the elevator wire from both space and earth to quickly create the exterior of the tower.

No need for scaffolding.

No need for cranes.

No need for safety checks.

That method allowed a durable building to be constructed with overwhelming speed even in an Antarctic environment where room temperature water would freeze almost instantly.

And while the tower was given durability, the method also provided joints in the connections between each block so that it could "bend" a bit if needed.

Such a gigantic building would normally take over a hundred years to complete, but this construction technique allowed it to be finished in only a few days.

That alone may have rivaled the military advantage of the space elevator itself.

It displayed just how much of a threat Academy City and science were.

"The inside of the tower will include more than a single wire. Ultimately, several carbon nanotube belts will be lined up within."

But Ureapaddy did not need to wait for everything to be complete. She merely needed something that would carry her magic power from the surface up into space without attenuating. As long as that initial wire was connected, she could use the tens of thousands of shooting stars from Debris Storm to activate Brahma Astra.

"Now then. I was waiting for some information, but it is about time I ended this."

Ureapaddy smiled thinly.

She had most feared something would interrupt in the middle of her spell while completing the delicate task of using Brahma Astra on an unprecedentedly large scale.

The simplest form that could take would be if the elevator's wire snapped while the magic power was being sent through it.

Carbon nanotubes were stronger than steel and resistant to heat, so they were not easily destroyed. However, they were also extraordinarily weak to high voltage electric currents. If Academy City had built in a system to sever the wire, they might have activated it as soon as they detected what Ureapaddy was after.

And so she had waited.

She had given her enemy more than enough time to decide to use such a system.

But she had seen no sign of the space elevator's wire spontaneously snapping. It was obvious what Academy City's higher ups were thinking.

“They know the risk, but they must not want to lose the advantages the space elevator will earn them. If they cut the wire and the project is delayed, the rest of the world may detect the elevator and begin putting together countermeasures. If space is sealed off to them before it is complete, they may find it difficult to even construct the space elevator. And so they wish to quickly complete the elevator while it is still hidden.”

This was exactly what she had expected.

And despite knowing it was coming, she still felt scorn for them.

“Such a foolish decision. If the world is destroyed, any advantage will be worthless.”

Individuals made frequent mistakes, but they came to a decision quickly.

Organizations made few mistakes, but they came to a decision slowly.

Both sides had their advantages and disadvantages, but it worked to Ureapaddy’s favor this time. Her enemy may have been able to choose to stop her even at that very moment, but the situation was leading them to destruction.

And so Ureapaddy had no reason to hold back.

With nothing left to stop her, she merely had to continue as planned. As long as nothing stood in its way, a ball rolling down a hill would naturally reach its goal. And Academy City had taken all of the walls out of the way of the ball.

Or so she thought.

“Oh?”

Ureapaddy Exica frowned slightly.

She had caught sight of a small “wall”.

However, this was not a special defense system built into the space elevator that was humanities largest ever building.

It was something standing directly in front of her.

With the city’s various defensive networks compromised due to the wishes of the higher ups and the system interference from solar winds, the final “wall” to obstruct her took the form of a pitiful human being.

It was a boy.

A boy with spiky hair and a tightly clenched right fist.

“When I planned for this sort of obstacle, I assumed it would be my sister.”

“She’ll be here soon. I just got here a bit ahead of the others.”

“It does not matter. The number of my enemies is no longer an issue. I already have Brahma Astra in my hands.”

“Why do you need to go this far?” asked the boy calmly. “What is your goal here? With that level of destructive power, the damage will spread beyond Academy City. You should be able to target the entire science side…or the magic side if you want. You might be able to crush both sides with arrows to spare. What are you trying to destroy!?”

That put a slight smile on Ureapaddy’s lips.

Her long silver hair waved in the wind.

“That idea…”

“…?”

“…is what I must destroy. That is what I am fighting for.”

At first, her response made no sense. But she continued speaking. What motivated Ureapaddy grew apparent, little by little.

“Why do you think the science side has used such a cautious method to construct this giant building? A method of transportation cheaper and safer than rockets, a business sending out satellites and probes to other heavenly bodies, a starting point for acquiring resources from the moon, the beginning of production for orbital weapons that outdo ballistic missiles…They have many different ‘official’ objectives, but it all comes back to one thing: the conflict between science and magic. This is one step in the preparation to win that conflict.”

The positions and paths of the stars in the sky were used in magicians’ spells, so the giant space elevator was a threat. They had to think about the effect the tower itself would have on the “night sky” and, if large quantities of resources were carried up using the elevator to create space stations on a scale never before seen, the armillary sphere itself would need to be redrawn.

It was possible the elevator could cause the spells of countless magicians around the world to activate without warning.

“And the magicians like me that have been modified or constructed to be specialized towards a specific spell are more or less the same thing. It is blatantly obvious that making us so specialized leaves us with major disadvantages in most situations. The reason the magic cabals stubbornly insist to focus on a single piece of magic is quite

simple: they desire large-scale military might with which to oppose the dangerous science side."

"Is that why you are doing this? Because you were forced into these changes you did not wish for?"

"Admittedly, the Astra reorganization was not an enjoyable experience. I am no longer anything more than an existence created by taking around fifteen people with the 'proper' ability, having only the 'proper' portions of their spirits removed and combined, and finally having that averaged artificial spirit reinserted. Technically, all fifteen had that artificial spirit reinserted, but I am the only that remains. The spirit itself was optimized, but discrepancies with the physical body that received it caused the others' spirits to be rejected by their physical body. I just happened to be a close enough match. But thanks to that optimization, it is hard to say if I am even Ureapaddy Exica anymore."

Those easily spoken words caused the spiky-haired boy's shoulders to jump.

It seemed to be quite a shock to him.

That had been nothing more than the entrance of the path leading to Brahma Astra. The cabal had been so twisted that something like that could be called nothing more than an entrance.

"However. I see that as only one of many gears. I am not so conceited as to think my tragedy is all that matters. The same sort of tragedy occurs all across the magic side and I am sure plenty of it can also be found on the science side as well. …Doesn't it all seem so ridiculous?"

"You don't mean…"

"Magic works to grow stronger so that it can defeat science. Science works to grow stronger so that it can defeat magic. And in the process, taboo after taboo is broken without end. What is this chain reaction? If someone had brought it to an end at some point, all of this tragedy might have been avoided. And yet the scale of violence continues to grow as people swing their swords into the darkness without even knowing who it is they are fighting. Once this arms race passes a certain point, a power will be born that is great enough to destroy the entire world."

"So you want to destroy everything to bring that chain reaction to an end!?"

"No, that is not it. What matters is gathering attention." Ureapaddy smiled thinly. "A great stimulus is needed to wipe away the darkness that both science and magic are spreading before themselves. After I am done, Brahma Astra will most likely become a symbol of fear for a great number of people. But that will wipe away the darkness whether they like it or not. They will want to know what happened, who is to blame, and how to stop it. And as they investigate, they will realize just what sort of a world exists beyond that darkness."

The boy gritted his teeth. He had likely realized another fact.

It was for that reason that Ureapaddy had not simply relied on her own magic. With the space elevator and Debris Storm, she had included cutting edge technology in this plan she was risking her life for.

At first, the science side and magic side might try to force blame onto each other.

But as they investigated the incident that greatly involved both worlds, the people would realize something. They would realize just how much their enemy could accomplish. They would learn it in specific terms rather than as endlessly expanding fear and delusions.

Once they knew, the darkness could be swept away.

The incident with Brahma Astra might temporarily worsen the opposition between magic and science. But the "understanding" it would bring would also help to bring an end to the negative chain reaction that would otherwise spread infinitely.

"As I stood on the front lines of the fight with science, I truly experienced that pointless chain reaction. And I also grew to trust science at least enough to risk my life for it," said Ureapaddy as her long silver hair blew in the wind. "If neither side is looking at the other, I just need to bring them close enough to see each other. Even if that means they must be at each other's throats. It does not matter if it starts with hostility and animosity. As long as it ultimately leads to understanding, we can stop this conflict."

It was all to stop that great conflict.

It was all to stop the unnecessary inflation of risk.

It was all so that the people of the world could continue to smile.

It was all for justice.

It was all for peace.

And Ureapaddy Exica would wield the full power at her disposal to accomplish it.

"…I see," muttered the spiky-haired boy. "So you don't even know what it really is that motivates you."

"What?"

"I've come across people like this a few times before, so I have a fair understanding of it. People cannot fight for some great objective like that. Even if they claim it is for some great objective, they are truly thinking of some small thing that will be saved if it is achieved."

Ureapaddy was confused by the boy's words, but she did not care to question him.

Her silver hair shook slightly.

She had begun to shift her body weight.

That was all it took to change the surrounding atmosphere. What had been a gentle breeze now felt brutal and like it could cut into the skin.

Nevertheless, the boy tightly clenched his right fist and spoke.

"If you don't know what I'm talking about, then I'll remind you. Then even you will understand. Even if your supposed goal is perfectly achieved, your methods will never save what you are trying to protect!!"

Part 3

Ureapaddy Exica.

Her primary weapon was Braham Astra that used the shooting stars that would soon fill the sky, but Sozty had said she also used several Shiva-related Astras. She had easily defeated the operating unit of her own magic cabal in a surprise attack and neutralized the escort vehicles for the satellite guidance vehicle, so those Astras could not be taken lightly.

On the other hand, Kamijou Touma had Imagine Breaker.

It was limited to his right wrist and down, but that power gave him the ability to completely negate any form of supernatural power. It was his trump card against those that used unusual things to produce unusual effects.

That was why he felt her previous accomplishments did not matter.

He could overturn them.

He could produce an unexpected result.

Kamijou's calm analysis told him that possibility existed.

And perhaps he was not wrong.

Perhaps he did have that possibility.

However…

It may have been wrong to be satisfied with a possibility that lacked certainty.

He had been naïve.

The fierce attack that came in the next instant taught Kamijou Touma that fact all too well.

“Gandiva,” whispered Ureapaddy.

Her hand moved as if she was drawing a bow and a bluish-white arrow appeared out of thin air.

A great tension ran through the bottom of Kamijou’s gut, but distance meant nothing to an opponent with a projectile weapon. The shorter the radius of a circle, the shorter the diameter. If he wanted to evade by circling around his opponent, he would find it easier the closer he was to the enemy.

But Ureapaddy’s target with this spell she named Gandiva was not Kamijou. She aimed the arrow straight up and released the taut bowstring as if she was trying to shoot the heavens.

With a roar, a bluish-white line of light tore through the dark of the night.

An instant later, more than ten arrows of light rained down on the area.

“...!!”

Kamijou immediately held his right hand up towards the tremendous light and sound, but then he noticed something. The falling arrows tore into the ground near him, but none of them fell at him directly.

(Not good! This was just meant to hold me in place!)

The attack was meant to seal off his expected paths of evasion.

The rain of arrows was like a cage meant to trap one’s prey.

And Kamijou saw it.

It was right in front of him.

As Ureapaddy smiled thinly, a golden glow came from her right hand. It was a spear. At some point, she had switched from Gandiva to some other spell. And the tip was pointed directly at Kamijou.

It was as if she was sticking some sharp blade in through the gaps of the cage.

A surefire attack was coming.

“Trishula.”

That whisper called in a great disaster.

An explosive noise rang out.

The golden tip stabbed directly towards Kamijou Touma. She had only used this surefire strike after cutting off his escape routes. That destructive power that was great enough to rip apart and melt the asphalt stabbed mercilessly towards a flesh-and-blood human.

It resembled lightning.

If that lightning attack had struck the side of a submarine, it would have evaporated over half of it.

However…

During that flash of lightning, Ureapaddy Exica saw something.

She saw a certain right palm receive that tremendous light. And in the next instant, the Trishula strike was blown away with the sound of bursting air.

“I see.” Ureapaddy gave a thin smile as she repeated the motion of drawing a bow in order to create the spell called Gandiva. “So you actually do have enough power to set foot into this world.”

Kamijou took a quick breath and then charged toward Ureapaddy at full speed.

If his fist could reach…

If he could get close enough…

“But.” Her lips twisted ominously. “Pashupata.”

Kamijou heard an unpleasant creaking noise. But not in from his ears. He heard it directly through the vibrations in his bones.

The sound grew into a pain.

He forgot all about all of the cartilage in his body as his entire body was wrapped in an intense pain like having one’s back teeth scraped down with a course file.

“Ghabhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

He fell to the ground, thrashed about, and arched his back like a bow. Ureapaddy looked down on him with a grin.

“That is an interception Astra. I was warned never to use it against a person, though.”

As she whispered, the golden light of Trishula that resembled a three-pronged spear appeared in her hand.

She was going to strike at close range.

The sound of the air being roasted reverberated through the area.

“Oh? So you can still defend against it from this close? My, my. And even when I use it so many times in a row. My, my, my.”

Lightning flashed again and again.

And even while collapsed on the ground, Kamijou swung his right hand to negate the lights as they fell towards him one after another. If even one made it through, his body would be blown to pieces.

“Hm? So you can remove the Pashupata within you simply by pressing your hand against your body? What a convenient right hand. Convenient, but it seems you need the right hand to do it. In that case…”

“!?”

Kamijou immediately rolled to the side.

In the next moment, Ureapaddy dropped another Trishula. But not at Kamijou who was at her feet. She had intentionally missed. The asphalt melted from the high heat so that the boy would be enveloped by that black bog.

He just barely avoided being fried.

Intense pain ran through Kamijou’s upper arm where a few drops of the black liquid landed, but he did not have time to worry about it. After gaining a bit of distance, he shot to his feet.

“Parashu.”

Ureapaddy held nothing in her hand and yet a heavy weight as if from an axe could be seen weighing it down.

She lightly swung it horizontally.

With a tremendous noise, the melted asphalt at Ureapaddy’s feet was sliced in two.

Ureapaddy slowly walked through the path she had created.

“It may seem I use so many Astras because I enjoy novel and destructive techniques.” Her hands nocked another of the bluish transparent arrows of the Gandiva spell. “However, I use so many techniques to ensure reliability. And so I will repeat the same methods as many times as it takes. I will repeat the attacks I have proven to be effective.”

“!!”

Kamijou did not have time to say anything.

Ureapaddy whispered name after name.

“Gandiva.”

“Parashu.”

“Pashupata.”

She sealed off his path of escape, forced him to use his right hand to defend against an attack that would otherwise kill him, and then used the interception spell while he was stopped to eat into his bones. Her means of attack was almost exactly the same as before. But he could not overcome it. Before Kamijou’s body could fall to the ground due to the intense pain torturing his entire body, Ureapaddy reached out a hand to grab his neck.

“Gah…gh…!!”

“Oh, right. You negated Pashupata with your right hand, didn’t you? Could you prove to me that is all you can do? Once you do, I will have the certainty I need. Certainty that I can wear you down and defeat you by repeating this enough times.”

“Is that so…dammit!!”

“Now, now. Don’t force yourself. Choosing a different path when you have no cards left in your hand will only bring you to a stalemate faster. I changed the details, but your response was the same. If the range of attacks you can handle with that right hand is fairly wide, then it should be difficult for you to escape from the rails I have prepared.”

She tossed Kamijou to the asphalt as easily as tossing an empty can away.

And the next attacks came.

“Gandiva.”

“Trishula.”

“Pashupata.”

The pain spread. His weariness grew. And as it did, Kamijou lost his calm and his thoughts grew simpler and simpler. If he could not even overcome that set procedure, the Trishula and Parashu Astras would smash him to pieces.

"That should do it. Now that we have seen each other's abilities, all that remains is to bring this to the end we can both already see coming. So let us end this. If you have any last words, you should speak them now."

"..."

"If not, that is fine too." Ureapaddy grinned as her long silver hair blew in the wind. "This was a meaningless sacrifice, but it will make you the foundation for the change created by Brahma Astra. I suppose I can remember you as playing that role."

She did not hesitate.

A tremendous sound of destruction reverberated throughout District 23.

Part 4

The Astra named Parashu's primary characteristic was simply how sharp it was. In legends, it was known to have beheaded many an enemy.

Naturally, it could easily remove the head of a flesh-and-blood human.

Ureapaddy created a stable cycle of attacks made up of several methods in order to build up pain and exhaustion that would rob the enemy of their ability to think. Once they were driven too far to accomplish even simple tasks, she would let loose a definite attack which would take their life before they could evade or defend.

It was quite simple.

It was the job of an expert to construct methods to make difficult things simple.

Or so it should have been.

However...

Kamijou Touma did not even try to use his right hand.

He avoided the deadly Parashu by twisting his upper body just barely out of the way.

"?"

Ureapaddy was a bit confused by this change in the pattern of his actions. He had evaded rather than defended. It sounded simple enough in words, but her magic could slice his body in two if it even just barely touched him. When faced with that sort of magic and when he had a perfectly effective shield, choosing to not use that defense would have been a difficult decision.

And Ureapaddy had cornered him, exhausted him, and robbed him of his ability to think so that he would not be able to make such a decision.

With only the level of thoughts that were welling up within the boy named Kamijou Touma, it would have been hard for him to take that action that strayed from the previous path.

So where had the thought come from?

"…Pinakapani."

"What?"

"The one who wields Pinaka. That is one of the many alternative names for the god Shiva. That is an Astra that holds such great meaning and yet its actual form is not known for sure. …Or you could say it can fit in the space provided for it no matter what its form."

That was correct.

He was correct.

But the situation had not been one which would lead the boy to the correct answer.

"Wait. Wait a second. What is going on here? Where did it go wrong!? It is true you have made it this far, but I do not detect the hint of magic from you!! So…how?"

She fired Gandiva.

Several arrows of light rained down from the heavens to stop the boy's movements by sealing off his expected escape routes.

But the boy was not stopped.

He continued forward regardless.

"And…"

The cycle had been broken.

The situation had left its set rails.

“Nataraja. The lord of dance is another name for Shiva. You can use various spells by expressing them in the form of dance. That is the true form of your Astra. Even if you appear to be still and even if your arms and legs are motionless, you always dance when you use your magic. You can still dance. After all…”

He was supposedly an amateur when it came to magic.

Ureapaddy did not know the details, but he was supposedly just some person who had ended up mixed into the world of experts.

Even without knowing the specifics, she could tell just by looking at the way he stood.

And yet…

“After all, the gods of Hindu mythology do not necessarily have just two arms and two legs. Gods with a whole lot of eyes or arms aren’t too unusual. You modeled your spells off of that, so there is no real reason for you to always have two arms or two legs. For example…”

He knew too much.

He had fully analyzed it.

It was as if a god had whispered the answers in his ear.

How was an amateur boy supposed to see through that specialized spell designed to deceive expert magicians? For one thing, he did not have the knowledge necessary to solve it. How could someone solve a math problem without knowing the formulas involved? How would they figure anything out?

“That long hair. You have a magic dancing arm hidden in there. That is your spiritual item known as Pinaka and it is the single point that controls all of your Astras!!”

She had a reason for hiding it.

Ureapaddy controlled her various Astras in the form of dance, so if one could see the dance, one could possibly see through the type, target, and timing of the coming attack.

And so she hid it.

Hid it in her hair.

Now that he knew the location of her Pinaka, could that boy foresee Ureapaddy's attacks and evade them?

It was simple enough to say.

But…

"You can't do it," muttered Ureapaddy. Her voice eventually grew to a shout based in confusion. "Even if you know where my Pinaka is and even if you can directly observe my dance! Only another expert magician can interpret what spell I am going to use and how!! So…how? How!? How was an amateur like you able to comprehend my spell to such a concrete level!?"

"…Isn't it obvious?"

In response…

The boy named Kamijou Touma forced his body to move despite the pain and weariness and raised his right fist.

"This wasn't just my own power. I obviously had help!!"

After hearing that, Ureapaddy finally caught on.

She looked around and spotted a flashing light in the distance. It was blinking at a regular interval; it obviously held some meaning. It was a code that allowed communication based on the length of the flashes.

And she recognized the light.

It was the incomplete Astra that her younger sister had forcibly used despite the burden it put on her body.

It was the base form of Agni's Festival Fire, the Agni Astra.

On one hand, the Astra could be used offensively to destroy the enemies of the god with tremendous lightning and flames. On the other hand, the god that held the Astra held the characteristic of light that possessed symbolic meaning…that is, the festival fire.

And that light had given Kamijou Touma the magical knowledge he lacked.

"…She couldn't."

"Couldn't what?"

"There is no way she could. She could not even use the large scale Agni's Festival fire prepared by the cabal. So if she tried to use Agni Astra with no alterations or support…"

“Then what is that over there?” asked Kamijou quietly. And then he gave the answer. “Even when it did not produce the results she wanted, she did not give up on it. And she found a way to use Agni Astra in a new way. I can’t speak on the more difficult issues like the concepts of absolute good or evil, but I prefer the direction she takes things. Instead of sweeping everything away with overwhelming violence, she supports her allies.”

“…”

Ureapaddy had been so focused on the enemy before her eyes that she had forgotten about that possibility.

She had assumed he had made it all that way on his own.

But she was wrong.

“Stiyl drew Anti-Skill away while the rest of us headed here. I confronted you directly while Index viewed you from afar to analyze what exactly you were doing. And then Sozty got that answer to me.”

If she had known about the analysis team, crushing them first would have made the most sense.

But she had not thought her methods would be revealed.

It was a simple division of roles.

However…

“Sozty.”

Ureapaddy’s smile froze on her face.

The look in her eyes silently yet surely changed as she spoke her sister’s name.

“Sozty Exica!!”

“That was your reason, wasn’t it?”

Suddenly…

The boy’s words seemed to cut off the flow of events up to that moment.

But he did not see it that way.

To him, this was more important than her methods or a means of defeating her. This may have been the question he wanted answered the most.

“You could never get that look in your eyes for a complete stranger you do not care about. If the magic cabal had continued as it was, the other members might have taken part in projects similar to or even worse than the one you experienced. If the conflict between science and magic intensified, everyone you knew might have been thrown into a hopeless war. And so you tried to stop it. Using every means at your disposal.”

“…”

“I am not trying to say that thinking is wrong in and of itself. But this is meaningless. If you use Debris Storm to scatter Brahma Astra across the world, it will affect the very person you are trying to protect! You are making an enemy of the world to protect that person, so why would you destroy her with your own hands!?”

“Wait. You’re not making sense. That is not my goal. She has worked to keep me from achieving my goal, she has opposed me, and she has come to fight me to the death.”

“Where did you go wrong?” asked the boy with the expression of someone who had bitten into something bitter. “Was it when you decided to attack Academy City? Was it when you decided to carry out that surprise attack on your fellow magicians? Was it when you decided to attack both science and magic with Brahma Astra? …Was it when you realized you had to do this to protect your sister? Was it when you could not bear to take so many lives to save just a single life? Was it when you decided you wanted to protect your family nevertheless?”

That was why she had changed what she was weighing on the scales.

She was no longer weighing her sister’s life against the many lives that Brahma Astra would take.

She was now weighing the many who belonged to science and magic against the comparatively few whose lives would be taken by Brahma Astra.

“But that changes nothing.”

“Wait.”

“You were going to sacrifice everything to save just one life, so it does not really matter whether it was comparatively large or small!!”

“No, that makes no sense. It isn’t logical. I simply want to save the world! I will bring an end to this pointless arms race between magic and science. That is all I want. There is nothing more that-…!!”

“The anger you felt towards your sister was not because she had stood in the way of your plan!!”

That boy walked directly towards Ureapaddy.

Parashu, Gandiva, Trishula, Pashupata. She fired Astra after Astra, but nothing could stop Kamijou anymore.

His courage and the support of those he called his comrades cut open a path for him.

“It was because the one you wanted to protect more than anything else had put herself in a position where she would be blown away by Brahma Astra!! It was because you would now need to hurt her with your own hands!! Am I wrong? If you were simply angry, you would have turned that anger towards me. But you turned it toward Sozty who is so far away instead of me, the enemy right in front of you. That means your anger had some other reason behind it!! Am I wrong, Ureapaddy Exica!?”

His right hand reached out.

It reached out to rob her of the spiritual item hidden in her long silver hair.

“Let’s end this. You do not need a tool of killing! There must have been some better option!!”

She was unable to avoid it.

Or perhaps she had not wished to avoid it.

As if tearing it off, the boy’s right hand destroyed the thin, doll-like arm hidden in her hair.

Part 5

An instant passed.

But it was not all over.

Gandiva, Trishula, and the other Astras controlled by the Pinaka spiritual item had been nothing more than sub-Astras meant to protect her primary one.

Brahma Astra.

That was her greatest Astra…her greatest spiritual item. Its purity was much higher than all of her others.

And…

“Ureapaddy!!”

“This really should not surprise you. Unlike my other Astras, Brahma Astra is related to the god Brahma. And while Sozty and the others could use Gandiva or Parashu, only I can use Brahma Astra. Did you not realize it is a completely different type of Astra? I can use it with or without Pinaka.”

The brown woman held a giant bow made of gold in her hand.

Unlike the Shiva-related ones from before, this weapon was related to the god Brahma.

It was the ultimate Astra in a certain magic cabal.

But…

“No, that isn’t what I meant!! Why are you wielding it!? If you continue what you started here, you will destroy everything that you wanted to protect!!”

“Now then.” Ureapaddy Exica smiled thinly. “In the end, what was my goal? I still wish to protect the world. However, I also understand that doing so would require wiping out something else. But…”

“But what!?”

“But I can no longer stop it.”

Even if she knew she had gone wrong at some point, she could not change the path she was walking on. Her stable experience and her many past successes made her reject the idea of switching the rails of her plan over to some unknown direction. All of those past experiences pushed her onwards. Even if it required bending the truth a bit, they insisted she continue on.

That was an illusion.

Her actions would be completely meaningless, but that illusion gave them value.

“Boy, I never asked your name.”

The stars became visible.

But these were no normal stars. The black sky was filled with unnatural lights that one would never see on any armillary sphere or in any planetarium.

They were false shooting stars created from manmade objects. And they poured down.

The time limit set by Debris Storm had come. That violent light met the usage requirements for Brahma Astra and expanded its effects endlessly.

“Boy, what is your name?”

“…Kamijou Touma. Why?”

“I see.”

Ureapaddy Exica looked up into the sky.

A hint of loneliness could be seen in her eyes as they watched the unnatural deluge of light that she had created.

“Then, Kamijou Touma. I cannot stop Brahma Astra on my own. Make sure you understand that.”

She drew back the bowstring.

She had not nocked an arrow and yet a golden arrow appeared at some point.

When she let it fly, the world would end.

That was how much destructive power it held.

“And, Kamijou Touma. As the victor, you must end this with your own hand.”

When he heard those words, Kamijou Touma quietly smiled.

And he replied.

“Bring it on. I’ll smash every last bit of that illusion of yours to pieces!!”

She changed her target.

The arrows of the gods that should have attacked every important point in the world were focused on a single point within District 23 of Japan’s Academy City.

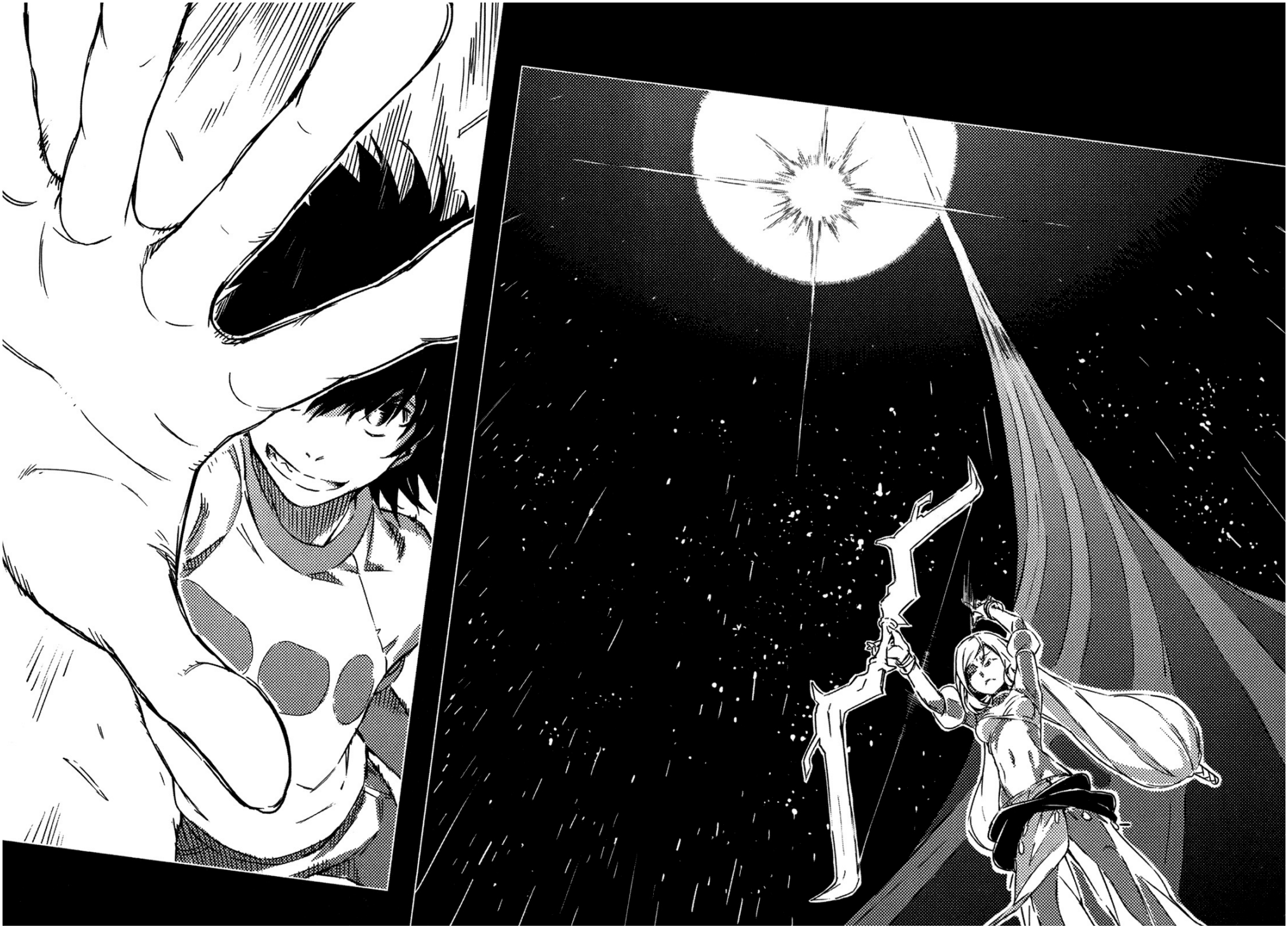
The storm of arrows raining down from heaven almost looked like a tornado.

And…

What that boy did in the end was incredibly, incredibly simple.

He stood tall on his two legs and held his right hand up towards heaven.

With a tremendous flash of light, the final round of offense and defense began.



Part 6

And so at the very least, the world did not come to an end, Academy City was not destroyed, and Kamijou Touma was not dead.

The busiest person after the fact seemed to be Stiyl Magnus, but Kamijou could not even guess what was going on behind the scenes.

Ureapaddy Exica had disappeared.

That was what had happened.

Due to the damage he had taken in the battle and the exhaustion from his final showdown receiving the full brunt of the Brahma Astra attack that should have assaulted the entire world, Kamijou Touma had allowed Ureapaddy to escape. Due to the security confusion and the interference of Anti-Skill, Stiyl and the others had been unable to pursue her.

And so the two sisters had apparently safely escaped.

The world was sturdier than one might think.

Despite that great event, it continued on like normal with nothing having been destroyed. In fact, the existence of the space elevator in District 23 had been made public. It was still officially said to be “under construction”, but the higher ups of Academy City must have deemed it at a stage where it could not be stopped.

The problem regarding Ureapaddy Exica had been resolved, but the danger of the space elevator remained.

How much chaos would be caused if it was used militarily or for something *beyond even that?*

The Venus Probe Contest had actually been a front for the elevator’s construction, and yet large numbers of rockets were still being launched into space. It was possible *they were hiding some goal other than the construction of the space elevator.*

“Touma.” Index called out the boy’s name. “You’ve been staring at that elevator a lot lately. Did something happen?”

“No,” said Kamijou in reply. “But if something does, I’ll destroy it too.”